

Fumi Yamamoto
Illustration by Nitaka



Mia and the Forbidden Medicine Report

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Mia and the Forbidden Medicine Report Fumi Yamamoto

Translation by Charis Messier

Illustration by Nitaka

Editing by Ingrid Chang and AMP

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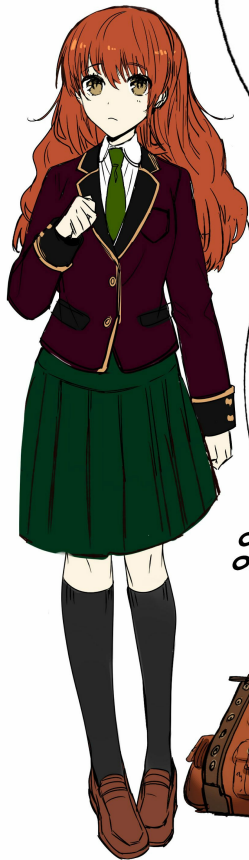
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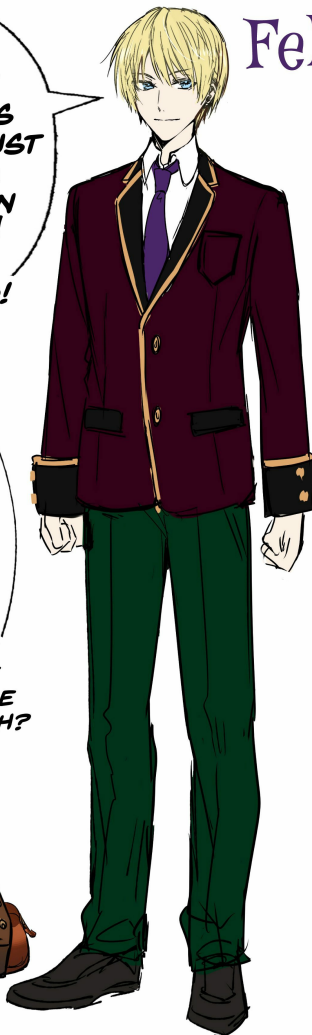
Mia



DON'T WORRY, MIA, THE ANSWER IS SIMPLE! JUST LEAVE A REVIEW ON AMAZON AND GOODREADS!

HEY, FELIX, WHAT SHOULD I DO TO SUPPORT CROSS INFINITE WORLD AND GET MORE LIGHT NOVELS LIKE OURS TO COME OUT IN ENGLISH?

Felix



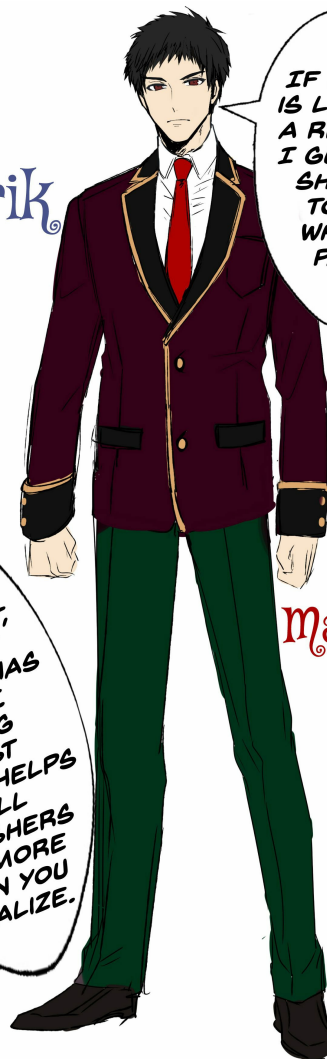
Henrik



AS MUCH AS I HATE TO ADMIT IT, THE IDIOT ACTUALLY HAS A POINT. LEAVING HONEST REVIEWS HELPS SMALL PUBLISHERS OUT MORE THAN YOU REALIZE.

IF FELIX IS LEAVIN' A REVIEW, I GUESS I SHOULD TOO... WHAT A PAIN...

Mathias



Chapter 1: Isea Royal Academy

AN outbreak of not one, but two strange diseases have plagued the Kingdom of Isea. Some say the diseases came from tears shed by angels; that the victims of the outbreak were a worthy sacrifice for unifying the peninsula. Others say the diseases were aftereffects left behind by the wounds of a demon's claws.

Righteous punishment for those who had invaded Radius—Kingdom of the Sun—and had killed the sun god.

MIA stopped in front of the towering, reddish-brown brick gate and squinted at the sky. Gray cirrocumulus clouds trailed overhead; signs of the autumn months hung thick in the air. A brilliant, deep-blue sky was the mark of her hometown, Lemmilt, where the sea breeze whisked away the clouds. But the skies over Royal Capital Erfurt were sooty, as if someone had dissolved blue paint into muddy water. Factories dotted the Royal Capital's landscape. Dark-gray smoke billowed endlessly from skyscraping smokestacks, blotting the color out of the sky. Great turbines clanked out a rhythmic beat and factories chugged endlessly with their eternally lit coal furnaces.

Standing out amid a landscape of smokestacks was a single spire, jutting out of the royal palace like a sword piercing through the smoky skies and beyond. Its massive size put the surrounding smokestacks to shame—threateningly looking down on the world below as if flaunting the might and power of Isea Kingdom. Zeppelins haphazardly navigated the smoggy skies, carefully avoiding the spire and smokestacks to keep from piercing the fabric covering their metal frames and puncturing the gasbags keeping them afloat. Mia had heard of the occasional explosion of smaller aircraft happening in Erfurt before. Quaint Lemmilt seemed worlds away, despite being a part of the very same kingdom.

Sighing, Mia angled her head back to peer up at the gate. Gears whirled inside its frame, keeping it pressurized in case someone tried to pry it open without

permission. "This is the right place, I hope."

Numerous carriages and automobiles zoomed across the wide King's Street, which connected Erfurt Station to the Royal Palace. Lanes were designated for the horse-drawn carriages, automobiles, autobikes, and pedestrians. Not a single building lining the busy street was anything but stately. Mia had been walking in the direction of a grand building on the side of the road, while trying to contain her discomfort around the crowds of people, popping engines, and hapless drivers, but she'd ended up making more wrong turns than she wanted to admit before she finally arrived at her destination. Astonishment had hit her every time she knocked on a large imposing gate, certain it was the right place, only to discover that she'd disturbed a private home.

Five times she'd found herself being snickered at, mocked for being a country bumpkin, among other curses she would rather not remember.

She was staring at the sturdiest, most daunting gate she'd seen yet, but anxiety still darkened her expression. She slowly read aloud the magnificently shining letters engraved above the gate, "Isea Royal Academy."

She nodded, "Yup! This is definitely the right place." She pulled her student paperwork out of her pocket and waved it below the letters. Each letter of the Academy's name slowly turned green and the gears keeping the gate shut whirled to life. The two halves of the gate popped and slid aside, allowing her entry.

Clenching her fist in front of her chest, she picked up her large wooden trunk and shabby old bag resting at her feet, and proceeded through the gate. The trunk clunked behind her as she dragged it. As Mia passed through the tunnel connecting the gate to the Academy, the smog cleared away, giving her the first good look inside.

A striking brick building dominated the center stage, appearing so sturdy that even a bulldozer probably couldn't knock it down. Two other brick buildings flanked it like the grand wings of a brick hawk. Closer inspection revealed several more buildings of the same color deeper inside the campus. The full expanse of the campus was unfathomable from only the gate and sprawling walls built to keep out curious onlookers and threats to the kingdom's top

students. No wonder the Royal Academy was rumored to rival the Royal Palace in size and security.

“Whoa...” Mia sighed in awe.

“Hey! Don’t just stand there, you’re in the way. We have places to be.”

Hurried footsteps sounded behind her before students clad in the same uniform shoved passed her in a flurry. Mia watched them disappear into the void of the main building. From what she could tell, that building housed the auditorium, where the entrance ceremony was going to take place.

“What’s the rush? Is it already that late?” Mia quickly glanced at her pocket watch, then cocked her head. “Worried me for nothing! There’s still twenty minutes before it starts.”

Having confirmed that she had time to spare, Mia took her first step onto the multicolored patterned stone paving. She casually glanced at the flower beds and spotted beautiful pink and white cosmos blooming there, as if they were welcoming her with all their glory. A hiss of pressure signaled a soft spray of steam from the conical pipes watering the plants.

Mom, Doctor, I’ve finally made it...!

Mia couldn’t stop her heart from brimming with excitement.

NEW students were filling out paperwork for their enrollment in the auditorium, overwhelming the five information desks. Most of the students had finished, already seated in the hall. Mia had timed her arrival with when the entrance ceremony was scheduled to start, but it appeared that she’d just barely made it. Now she understood why the other students had been in such a hurry and regretted her decision. How was she supposed to know that time flowed differently in the capital than in the countryside?

Aah...maybe I’ll need to keep in mind how long it’ll take to line up whenever I plan to go somewhere around here... With that thought in mind, Mia took a spot in the middle line.

“Please take out your enrollment authorization slip,” a tired voice prompted

her.

The staff members working at the desks were nearing the end of the 200 new students they had to register and their exhaustion showed. Mia fished through her rugged old bag, then pulled the enrollment authorization slip out from where she had stashed it between the pages of a book. She held it out, her cheeks flushed with excitement and pride. The man at the desk frowned at it.

“A green slip means you’re a Pharmacology student, yeah? Miss Mia Baumann. Um...please wait a moment.”

As soon as he read off her name and department, he grew even more annoyed realizing he would have to look her up in their registrar. Mia’s enrollment authorization slip tumbled from his hand while he flipped through the name register, but the man paid it no attention as he scanned his eyes over the laminated pages for her name.

“They forgot to update the village directory again!” he grumbled after dropping the registrar and switched over to typing away at a console of long metal typewriter keys.

Sure, it was just a piece of paper, but that didn’t change the fact it was *the* embodiment of everything Mia had worked herself ragged to obtain. Disappointed by the rude treatment, Mia bent down to pick up her slip, just as a female student to her left held out her own with pristinely manicured fingers.

“Hello. Here’s my slip.”

The girl’s slip looked like it had been ironed—it was without a single wrinkle, crease, or tear. Mia had to wonder if her slip was even made of the same material as the other girl’s. Hers was made of a stunning purple material while Mia’s was green.

“Hello, are you a law student?” The receptionist to the left straightened up, schooling his exhaustion into an amiable smile. He politely, even reverently you could say, accepted the enrollment authorization slip from the girl. Breathlessly, he offered, “Congratulations on your admittance.”

Mia understood the difference in treatment as soon as she’d heard the words “law student”.

So the rumors were true...

Isea Royal Academy had four departments of study: law, magic, medicine, and pharmacology.

The Law Department held the oldest history of the four. Since the founding of the Royal Academy, the Law Department had been established for noblemen's children. Sons and daughters of nobles were the only ones granted admittance. It was a special department that limited admission to children whose families held a court rank and contributed grand donations to the Academy. After graduation, every student would join the parliament or other branches of bureaucracy, becoming the pillar of support for the government. Law students were from a class of people that a commoner like Mia wouldn't have seen even in passing, had she not been admitted to the Academy.

Mia intently studied the female student. She had an attractive face and sculpted figure. From her silken gold locks to her big emerald eyes, refined beauty shone through her every feature. Even the manner with which she signed her name was graceful. Her elegant demeanor was a match made in heaven for the academy's uniform, which consisted of a dark-red blazer over a white blouse, coupled with a forest-green, knee-length pleated skirt. Her long, slender legs were beautifully concealed by black stockings. A famous fashion designer had redesigned the novel uniform just two years ago. Long since passed was the age where skirts worn above the ankles were considered immodest. The new uniform brought the Academy in line with the modern fashion raves.

Mia's burnt-steel red hair contrasted horribly with the uniform, and her eyes were an equally unimpressive light-brown. She wore the same uniform as the other girl, so why did she look so terribly unfashionable in comparison?

As Mia enviously stared at the other girl—

The clanking hiss of pressure burst from an aperture in the counter as a long tube popped out. Her receptionist flipped it open and removed a slip of paper before putting the tube back in the hole where it was sucked in with a hissing pop. "Aaah, found it, found it. Miss Mia Baumann. No mistake: you're a pharmacology student. Put this tie on then." The receptionist finally spotted her

name in the register.

Stealing another look to her left, Mia saw the law student had received a purple tie. Purple, red, blue, and green ties were distributed to students, indicating their departments. Then, just as Mia was exchanging her enrollment authorization slip for the green tie—

“Mathias Weiss. I’m a magic student.”

Mia turned toward the direction of the deep, booming voice, to find her eyes met sharply by the glare of the person who replaced another student to her right.

“Your bags are in the way,” he said rudely, coldly staring down at her.

Mia quickly moved her trunk and bag directly on top of her feet. Mathias moved into the open space, lining up directly beside her. His body was as large as she had imagined it to be from the sound of his voice. Was he really in the same school year? But what caught Mia’s attention the most was—

Is this guy...really a magic student?

With his raven-black hair and red eyes, she wouldn’t doubt it if someone told her he was already enlisted in the military. Calling him a boy felt more off than putting salt in tea, considering his bearlike frame. It was hard to believe he was only sixteen like Mia. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the bearlike boy exchange his red enrollment slip for a red tie.

The Magic Department was yet another special department. Only the most elite of the elite gathered there, for a reason separate from nobility—only those who possessed high magic potential from birth were admitted. Imagining him unleashing magic made the air prickle and tingle around him. Mia put a small space between them.

Isea Kingdom once led an army of mages into battle against the neighboring kingdom of Radius, defeating them to unify the peninsula. The military had gained political authority as a result, and had the Magic Department established at the Academy in order to further strengthen the mage battalion for taking on other enemies within the continent. Magic students were treated as national treasures. It was said that every citizen of Isea Kingdom possesses some form of

magic, but only one in every thousand would be talented enough to rival the gunpowder and technologically advanced weaponry from the neighboring kingdoms. The Magic Department's unique standing was immediately apparent by the fact that magic students were required to take only one entrance test—one that measured their magical prowess.

Mia's frown broke at the sound of the receptionist's voice. "You forgot to sign your scholarship application here." He held the paper out to her.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" She frantically scoured through her bag to find a pen, earning a loud sigh from behind her.

"Why don't you at least keep a pen and notepad on you? What'd you even come to the Academy for?" The owner of the voice retrieved a pen from his chest pocket, abruptly thrusting it at her.

"Th-Thanks." Mia lifted her face to express her gratitude and found herself staring right into frustrated eyes the color of fresh verdure, hidden beneath his platinum bangs tinged with blue. He shoved Mia aside and stepped forward. Clenched in his hand was a blue enrollment authorization slip.

Green is pharmacology, purple is law, red is magic...which means blue is for the Medical Department.

Mia's stiff expression softened, feeling some camaraderie with the boy. After all, the Medical Department and the Pharmacology Department were both said to have been created as an afterthought, for supporting the Magic Department.

A mysterious disease known as "Angel Tears" once ran rampant throughout the ranks of the Mage Battalion. Isea Kingdom's church-run medical clinics had been powerless to cure it. The kingdom thus invested everything into researching a cure to prevent the loss of their greatest military forces. The first domestic Medical and Pharmacology Departments of the Academy were founded as a result. Departments created for the sole purpose of supporting the Magic Department—due to such origins, people treated those departments as inferior. That said, the entrance exam for admission into the Medical Department was ten times more difficult than Pharmacology.

But that doesn't change the fact that both departments require working your butt off to get in! Unlike the others... I'm positive he must've put in backbreaking

work to get accepted by the Academy too!

Mia very much wanted to talk to him now, but before she got the chance, she was interrupted by the receptionist. “Here you go. Once you get your orientation papers, take a seat and wait for the ceremony to start. Oh, but you should drop your trunk off at the dorms first. Orientation will begin without you if you don’t hurry.”

Discouraged, Mia lifted the trunk off her feet. She glanced around, but no one else had their trunks with them. After a moment’s hesitation, she decided to try her luck and ask, “Excuse me, is it not possible for me to take my trunk in with me?”

She didn’t care about the trunk, but her bag was a memento from the person who had raised her. Everything important to her was contained inside—she couldn’t relax if she were away from it for even a moment.

“No one’s going to stop you from bringing it in, but it’ll get in the way. Where would you put it? Drop it off at your dorm please.”

Mia immediately retreated upon seeing the receptionist’s frustration with her. She understood this argument wasn’t important enough to pick a fight over, so she retrieved a single letter from her bag and safely tucked it away in her chest pocket. The letter was the one thing she could never bear to lose.

When she looked up again, she had been pushed out of the line, and the receptionist was no longer paying attention to her. He seemed to have his hands full assisting the medical student next in line and was clearly uninterested in dealing with her further.

“Excuse me! Where’s the dorm?” Mia shouted loudly.

Only one person reacted in the auditorium—a beautiful woman standing near the door smiled at her. She was the only female receptionist and donned a pair of curious blue-tinted spectacles. A composed glimmer in her purple eyes added to her charming image as a woman of intelligence. On her chest was a nametag with the name Einz written on it. To its left was “Assistant Professor”, indicating that she was a faculty member. The faculty hierarchy, Mia remembered, began from assistant professor at the base level, followed by lecturer, associate professor, and ending with professor as the highest rank. She

was at the bottom of the professor food chain, which explained why she was put to work at the registration desks.

What a pretty lady. I wonder what department she teaches for.

Professor Einz smiled at Mia, who was caught up in observing her. “Go straight to the south and turn right when you come out at the belfry. It’s at the end of the street.”

Red rushed to Mia’s cheeks at her gentle smile. She’d been worried she was being slighted because of her position as a pharmacology student; her fears cleared with her kindness.

“Thank you very much!”

“Hurry along now,” she urged Mia.

Mia bowed her head politely before dashing off with her trunk thumping behind her.

“**MATHIAS**, why aren’t you at the entrance ceremony? You’re a new student by all accounts,” Felix muttered, annoyed, as he gazed up at the Royal Academy dorm from the front quad.

Felix had done a rather good job escaping to enjoy his freedom, but he’d been caught in the end. He was outmaneuvered despite his excellent athleticism, which was the one thing he had confidence in. His frustration doubled at being cut off before he had the chance to make good use of it.

A towering man stood before him, an impenetrable mountain glowering sharply at him with red eyes, disregarding his complaints. Mathias, Felix’s childhood friend who he hadn’t seen in three years, had somehow forced his bulging muscles tempered by his military service into the Royal Academy’s student uniform, and looked wholly uncomfortable in it. The material pulled taut, threatening to burst at the intricate seams. Even if you scoured the entire Academy, you couldn’t find someone who looked worse in the Magic Department’s red tie—or rather—the entire uniform under the tie.

Catching wind of his friend’s thoughts, Mathias irritably straightened out his

tie, his brow creasing with his displeasure. “I handled the required paperwork. That’s good enough. Besides, I’m here because a *certain* spoiled kid won’t attend the entrance ceremony. Speaking of which, I wouldn’t be after you in the first place if you’d moved on to the next grade like normal! If you hate being watched like a hawk, curse your own weak, worthless self for needing a babysitter at this age!”

Mathias’ anger mounted and his true personality slipped out, ruining the respectful conduct he was supposed to treat Felix with. He should’ve at least laid off calling him a spoiled kid—it’d be off with his head if anybody had overheard him.

“Chill out. I never asked you to take care of me.”

“Of course not. You think I would listen to a request from you? Your father summoned me. I’m just as clueless why I’m stuck babysitting you. Probably because I’m the only person you can’t fool. You’re otherwise capable of protecting yourself. That’s about the only thing you’re capable of.”

“Then get off my back if that’s what you think.”

“This is my job now. You can complain all you want, but I will not quit until your father orders me to. What a freakin’ pain in the butt. Why do I have to blend in with a buncha squirts and enroll here too? I can’t believe I’m wearing this gaudy uniform at my age!”

“You look pretty goo—” Felix couldn’t finish without cracking up at the sight of Mathias’ shirt buttons ready to explode with the slightest flex.

Mathias shot him a furious glare. “I dare you to finish that sentence! I’m so cramped in this thing I’m gonna tear it off!”

The fact Mathias complained so much when he was a man of few words proved how much he hated it. Of course he did. He had wanted to join the military since they’d been kids. Three years had passed since he had shaken off multiple attempts at forcing him into the role of a mage. They had finally noticed his potential in joining a normal squad. His long-awaited future had been right in front of him when he’d suddenly been summoned back to the capital, then forced to masquerade as a magic student. Felix’s overprotective dad had gone out of his way to ensure he would graduate from school.

Do I look that sick to him? I've recovered a lot since then though. Or is he just trying to rehabilitate his letdown son into something more acceptable? It's the latter, no doubt. Even now, all his dad did was scold him. Felix smiled bitterly and pushed his bangs up.

Gloom erupted from the surge of weakness the memories brought, clouding his usually perfectly controlled emotions. A dark, fiendish lump gathered in the blink of an eye, seeping in from the cracks in his shield, accompanied by ringing in his ears. No, it wasn't ringing. It was the curse; a litany, "You must be perfect at all times." Whenever those words echoed in his ears, oppressive pain shot through him, suffocating him like a trained response.

This is bad. I need to take my medicine. Even if it's nothing more than a placebo. Felix rummaged through his chest pocket for the medicated potion prescribed to him.

Suddenly, the accursed litany gave way to the sound of footsteps. The suffocating feeling retreated, as if it were being sucked away. Relieved for the interruption, Felix hid behind a tree. He figured it'd be inconvenient if anyone spotted him being buddy-buddy with Mathias.

The owner of the footsteps was a girl with red hair, who was dragging her large trunk behind her while groaning. She proceeded in the opposite direction of the frazzled students rushing to the auditorium, leisurely taking her time to take in the scenery around her. She seemed out of place. Her starched uniform looked as fresh as the other new students', but without her tie on, it was impossible to tell which department she was from.

"I wonder if she's a medical or pharmacology student," Felix mumbled, on a hunch.

Mathias snorted. "Trying to say she's poor?"

Felix huffed in return. But then he reflected on why he had even come to that conclusion. Someone once told him that people usually thought through things opposite of how he did—you're supposed to come to a conclusion based on evidence. But the bases for Felix's guesses were almost always a hunch, and he didn't understand how he had reached his conclusion. He wasn't suited for thinking through things logically.

“She doesn’t have red eyes and isn’t wearing haute couture like the law students... Hey, Mathias, did you just call her poor? Man, you’re rude.”

As the boys began to argue, the girl came to a halt and exclaimed, “Wow, incredible! The flowering season should be over, yet they’re still in bloom!” She crouched down, becoming engrossed in picking some sort of weeds at her feet.

The adorable white flowers with yellow piths were pretty, but Felix didn’t think now was the best time for her to be picking flowers. He knitted his brow at her overly carefree behavior. There was something unreliable about her that he couldn’t stand to watch.

“What is she doing? Is she planning to skip the entrance ceremony?”

“Unlikely. She’s not you.”

Felix ignored Mathias’ provoking and continued observing the girl, when he noticed someone else. “...What’s with him?”

Another new student staggered out of the Boys’ Dorm. He had the same red tie as Mathias on. When he stumbled past her, the girl stopped picking flowers and spoke to him.

“Hey, are you okay?”

The deathly pale boy ignored her, hobbling toward the auditorium like he was drunk. He stared vacantly into the air. Trembles racked his entire body. Then he suddenly started scratching and clawing at his skin. Felix immediately recognized that reaction.

“...Chris,” Felix muttered. A sharp glint in Mathias’ red eyes flashed.

Chris was the name of their other childhood friend who had sat through the tedious entrance ceremony with Felix last year. He was an angelic young man with soft chestnut-brown hair and glimmering hazel eyes, who idolized Felix and followed him wherever he went. In spite of the fact that there was no reward for sticking around Felix, who constantly told him that he didn’t need a bodyguard, Chris had enrolled in the Royal Academy for no other reason than that they were childhood friends—no one had forced him to.

“Since we’re gonna enroll anyways, I’ll become a master mage and protect

you with my first-class skills. You can count on me for anything!"

"It was an accident. Let it go," his father, the doctors, and everyone around him repeated over and over. But even after a year had passed, Chris' delirious expression was burnt into Felix's mind and the image wouldn't go away. Felix had never doubted his self-worth as much as he had in that very moment.

Felix barely managed to suppress the pain quickly constricting his chest before it consumed him. Instantly, his throat went dry, a lump formed, and his head spun. *This is bad*, he thought. Fear rose in him in anticipation of what he knew was to come. But he couldn't just watch from the sidelines.

He vehemently shook away the fog closing in on him and warned Mathias, "... He's infected with *Angel Tears!*"

He had seen these symptoms before. When the symptoms abated, his friend had cackled madly. *"Hey, Felix, guess what? I can fly. Watch me."*

Chris' smile brimmed with utter confidence. He had been truly convinced that he could fly. But what had followed was a limp heap with crooked limbs, and a dark-red pool of blood. The gruesome scene resurfaced in Felix's mind, and he covered his mouth; nausea bubbled in the pit of his stomach. He never wanted to see that scene again.

"He's infected?!" Just as Mathias blanched, the redhead placed her large trunk on the ground.

"Are you all right? You look sick. Why don't we go to the med room—" She put her hand on the student's shoulder. He instantly snapped.

"AAAAAGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHH! DIE! DIE! DIE!" He shrieked, yanked a knife from his pocket, and swung it wildly. The girl jerked back and stumbled, falling awkwardly onto her butt. But her reflexes had saved her life.

Losing track of the girl, the boy turned his vacant eyes toward the smoggy skies. Laughing maniacally, he darted off toward the auditorium.

MIA stuffed the chamomile she had picked into her pocket and ran after the boy. The auditorium was already in an uproar by the time she caught up to him.

“Let go! Let go of me!” Security stopped him in the middle of his violent rampage and was dragging him away.

Most of the students had evacuated outside, leaving behind only those who had sustained injuries from being trampled or failing to escape from the crazed slasher fast enough. At the sight of students covered in blood, Mia unlatched the clasp on her shabby old bag. Medical tools spilled out from its wide opening. She had inherited the bag and its contents from Doctor Letts, a doctor at the Lemmilt Medical Clinic Mia had once been in the care of.

The medical tools weren't the only thing she had inherited. Mia worked as a medical assistant at the clinic for the past ten years. First-aid procedures were beat into her. By now, it was second nature.

While the academy contained a Medical and Pharmacology Department, the older students weren't present for the entrance ceremony. The only people present capable of treating the injured students were the Medical Department's faculty. But they must've rushed off to get their medical supplies, because Mia didn't see anyone treating any of the injured students yet. Not that anyone could blame them for being unprepared. Who could've predicted this was going to happen?

Mia pulled a red ribbon out of her bag. She tied back her cascading long red hair as she raised her voice, “Calm down! Bring the injured over here!”

Students and security helped the injured walk over to her. So far, they appeared to only have minor injuries. Mind set at ease, Mia retrieved bandages and alcohol from her bag, gave directions on how to stop the blood, and asked the people around her to assist with disinfecting the wounds. “Thoroughly rub the alcohol around this area,” she instructed.

Mia scanned the area to see if anyone else was hurt who hadn't been brought over yet. The medical clinic had thoroughly trained her to never overlook a seriously injured patient. Times of chaos were the easiest to miss casualties. *One wrong step could make the difference between life and death. People who could've been saved will end up dead.*

Mia slowly spun around, taking in her surroundings. Her eyes landed on one particular person. A boy in a uniform squatted on the ground near the

auditorium entrance.

“Felix?! Someone help! Is there a doctor here?!” The hulking man beside him ran off to get a doctor in a panic.

Feeling an odd sense of déjà vu, Mia strained her eyes for a better look. She finished disinfecting the injured patients in front of her, then handed the bandages to the person helping her. “Wrap this spot here. If you can’t do it right, just keep pressure on it for now. Take care of the rest here.” Entrusting the situation to the others, she sprinted towards the boy.

“Are you all right?!” Mia shook the crouched boy awake, and was astounded by the handsome face that appeared. Her awe lasted for but an instant—she immediately switched to examining his condition. The white skin hidden under his blindingly golden hair was ghost-pale. He squeezed his eyes shut, shaking relentlessly as he sucked in short gasps of air, clenching his chest like he was suffocating.

Is he hyperventilating?

Swallowing excess air would only further the feeling of suffocation. Overbreathing results in decreased carbon dioxide in the blood, which reduces the blood flow to the brain and causes dyspnea. During Mia’s time at the medical clinic, she had come across many young children and adolescent girls who had shown symptoms of this illness, but it was unusual to find in a young man his age.

“Sorry. You’ll have to wait a bit,” she told the students with minor injuries waiting their turn.

Hyperventilation and panic attacks weren’t life-threatening in most cases. But the patient inflicted is crushed by the fear that they might die at any moment. Mia strongly believed the hyperventilating boy felt the closest to death than anyone else present.

She pulled him to her chest like she had done with the young children. He was under extreme stress from the gruesome, tragic spectacle before them. Mia knew that reassuring him in this manner was the most effective way to relieve his anxiety.

Oh, I know! I have something useful on me!

Mia pulled the chamomile out of her pocket and put it in his hand. One of the habits she had picked up from her time at the medical clinic was to pick medicinal herbs whenever she spotted them. She had planned to boil down the chamomile as an ingredient for painkillers, but its apple-like fragrance would be effective in mitigating his anxiety.

Mia slowly rubbed his back in gentle strokes, whispering, “It’s okay. You’re okay. Calm down. Deeply exhale. Don’t inhale. Slowly exhale.”

“They’ll...die. Everybody’s...gonna die. It’s my fault Chris—and I—it hur...ts...I can’t...breathe...” he wheezed, sucking in air like his life depended on it.

Mia caught his hand to stop it from painfully clawing at his throat with enough force to rip his tie off, and she gently touched her finger to his lips to obstruct his breathing. He’d be forced to breathe through his nose with his mouth blocked, decreasing the oxygen intake.

Knowing she needed to set his fears at ease, she soothed, “Don’t worry. It’s not your fault. Everybody’s safe. No one is going to die. They’re in pain, but their lives aren’t in jeopardy. It’s okay. They’ll all be better soon.”

Mia didn’t know who Chris was, but no one present was in critical condition. She stroked his hair, telling him repeatedly that it was okay, until the fear finally slipped from his face. She patted him on the back to the beat of her heart with her other hand, helping his breathing slowly return to normal. He was going to be fine once he remembered how to breathe. Confirming signs of his recuperation, Mia sighed with relief and pulled away from him. She was about to entrust him to someone else, when his hand shot out, grabbing hers. He looked imploringly at her.



“Don’t go.”

Mia stood stock-still in mute amazement. His previously weak gaze, glazed with unshed tears, had regained its manly intensity as he returned to himself. His golden hair shined like the sun, as if it were crafted from gold silk. Captivated by the grayish-blue eyes peeking out beneath his golden bangs, Mia held her breath. His eyes possessed the chilliness of a winter lake, with a thin, fragile layer of ice coated over it. Pain lightly misted his eyes. He bared such intense vulnerability, but it made him all the more beautiful.

Now that she had a better look at him, beneath his manly eyebrows were almond eyes, a straight nose, and generously curved lips. His facial features were absurdly chiseled to perfection.

Whoa. What is with this guy?! He’s so pretty!

Transformed from patient into handsome boy, the young man pleaded with Mia, “Don’t leave me. Please.”

She couldn’t pry her eyes off him. His hands still shook. He was so desperate, like a child clinging to his mother. Mia’s maternal instincts screamed at her to squeeze his hand. But she resisted. She wasn’t dealing with a little boy, but a new student like her—or so she thought, until she realized his uniform showed signs of wear. Kinked and loose in some areas, his uniform looked and felt different from the starched stiff uniforms of new students.

He’s an upperclassman then? Why’s he here?

Mia eyed him suspiciously, just as the student who had rushed off earlier came back with a teacher, announcing, “I’ve brought the school doctor so we’re good here. We don’t have enough hands yet. Go help the students over there.”

The moment she glimpsed the Magic Department’s red tie out of the corner of her eye, Mia realized the reason for her déjà vu. She jerked her head up to find the bearlike man who had stood beside her in line at the registration desks.

“All right. Please take care of him.” Mia left the boy to the man and turned around swiftly. She proceeded to efficiently finish treating the rest of the injured students before help arrived.

“...I forgot to ask for her name,” Felix absently muttered to himself, as Mathias worriedly peered at him.

“Huh?” A dangerous glint flashed in Mathias’ eyes.

Fortunately for Felix, his panic attack had completely abated. The school doctor said he was fine now. So then why did his chest still hurt? Felix felt like a hole had opened in his chest the moment she’d left. The draft of cold air filling the gap between them chilled him. Was it because he’d learned the warmth and softness of human touch?

“What must I do to become better acquainted with her?” Felix desperately inquired of Mathias. Getting to know her would somehow calm the cold creeping in on him.

“...Her? You mean the girl who was just here?” Mathias clarified. Felix nodded.

Felix watched the girl. She had finished treating everyone and was in the middle of cleaning up. She removed her bloody gloves and stored away unused bandages. Undoing her ponytail had undone her commanding air with it, changing her image so drastically that even the people she had treated probably wouldn’t recognize her the next time they met.

Observing her calmly, she was just a normal girl without any unique characteristics or particularly noteworthy features. Or at least she should’ve been. But then why couldn’t Felix will himself to take his eyes off her?

“Are you saying you want to be her friend?”

“Yeah,” Felix nodded again. But it didn’t sit well with him right after. “...I think?” He cocked his head.

Friends?

Never having experienced a relationship of true friendship outside his childhood friends, Felix couldn’t tell if that was what he longed for. He tried comparing what he felt for her to his feelings for Mathias. There was a huge discrepancy between them.

Then what is this? As he searched himself for the answer, he became aware of a shadow obstructing his view. Mathias was waving his hand in front of Felix's face. *He's in the way*, he thought, but not wanting to lose sight of the girl, he seared her visage into his eyes.

"I have a horrible feeling this is gonna turn into somethin' insanely annoying..."

Chapter 2: The Name of the Most Important Thing in the World

“SO that was *Angel Tears...*”

Autumn leaves glittered like garnet under the sunlight. The water fountain in the front quad sprayed sparkling crystals of light into the air as if competing with the leaves. Mia muttered absently to herself, staring out the window at the glorious afternoon that had been blessed with mild late-autumn weather.

She was thinking about the incident that had taken place during the entrance ceremony.

The student who went on a slasher rampage was afflicted with a disease known as Angel Tears. The bizarre disease had first been recorded about a hundred years ago and it was only found in mages. Mia neither knew any mages nor lived around them, so it'd been her first time witnessing someone suffering from the symptoms of Angel Tears. It made the magic within the mage's body swell beyond their control until they were driven to insanity. In and of itself, Angel Tears wasn't life-threatening, but it was a terrifying disease where sheer madness drove the person to self-mutilation or resulted in other injuries due to their lack of self-awareness.

Fortunately, they had developed a medicine to assist with it, and the symptoms could be restrained if the afflicted mage was brought to a royal clinic for treatment. The disease was at fault—not the person. The faculty had instructed the students to warmly welcome the male student back into their ranks when he returned to the Academy.

*The disease is at fault and not the person, huh? They're right...that's how it **should** be.* Disgust roiled inside Mia; the memories of the awful treatment her mom had received flickered through her mind. Another side of her, one she took care to keep locked up inside, mockingly pointed out: *Then Mom's not at fault either, is she?*

Before she became captive to the anger she had long since buried, Mia lifted her face, looking about the room to distract from her thoughts. In the classroom that had exactly the number of seats as students, stood one empty seat. It had gone unfilled for so long that she wondered if termites would get to it first. Staring at the forever lonely, vacant seat, she sighed.

In the month since the entrance ceremony, one student in her year continued to miss class due to shock from the incident.

Are they all right? You have to be even more careful with wounds of the heart than the body... Mia snapped out of her reverie when her ears picked up on the explanation given at the front of the class.

“...As such, you’ll need to submit your Graduation Thesis Proposal before the Winter Solstice Celebration, and then you’ll be required to submit your Grand Plan as a team before the Summer Solstice Celebration. Prepare yourselves for the extra workload.”

Mia had zoned out and missed part of the explanation. She quickly jotted down what she heard. But she didn’t know what to write for the first half she’d failed to listen to. She considered asking someone, but immediately tossed the idea out the window.

A single glance about filled her view with a sea of purple ties—only unfamiliar law students sat around her.

The Academy was split into departments, but that didn’t mean there were no combined courses. The Royal Academy ran on a credit system, with students creating their own curriculum from their required courses, right from year one all the way through year six. First and second year students were required to take general education courses from the General Education Department so that they would be prepared to go out in to the world after graduation. General education courses spanned many topics, from foreign languages to world history, to the history of their own Isea Kingdom. The Graduation Thesis Guidance Course was among those required courses, and students from every department took it together.

Talking about the Graduation Thesis as soon as we start school? Aren’t they getting ahead of themselves? is what Mia thought, but once students reached

their third year at the Royal Academy, they were assigned to research laboratories and seminars where they would conduct research on the topic they had picked, which they were supposed to refine in their first two years. From there, they would begin writing their thesis.

Thesis particulars varied with each department, but everyone was in the clear as long as they submitted a Graduation Thesis by the time they graduated. Mia felt more at ease when she heard that, but it still wasn't as easy as it had sounded at first. The quality of the thesis decided the individual's future. She couldn't take her time to relax after hearing about how pharmacology students with excellent theses could secure research positions at facilities as early as year four. If she cut corners, there might not be a job waiting for her, even after six years.

Hoping to fill in the gaps of whatever else her professor had said while she had been daydreaming, Mia read through the guidance packet. The pages stated that students would spend their first year getting to know the research topic for each seminar, then choose which research group to join in their second year. It was standard for the student to decide on their thesis topic together with their seminar's professor before conducting research from their third year on.

But there were exceptions to the rule. Students were given the opportunity to submit a proposal for their Grand Plan by the end of their first year if they came up with their own topic. If it was considered creative and fascinating enough, they would be granted permission to turn that into their Graduation Thesis topic, in addition to receiving a special research stipend that freed them from being locked to a professor's set topic.

Just what I wanted! ...But hang on, you can only apply for the research stipend once every two years? Does that mean it's not offered next year? ...Let's see, research stipend applicants need to put their Grand Plan together and submit it by the end of the term to—

As Mia concentrated on underlining the key points in the guidance packet, she overheard the law students beside her quietly grumbling, "Writing the Grand Plan for our Graduation Thesis sounds like a total pain..."

“Do law students like us even need to worry about it? We’re goin’ into politics and all that jazz. Spending our time debatin’ stuff is gonna serve us way better than slogging away at some stupid thesis paper.”

Is it really as simple as that? Mia casually reflected as she listened to them.

A booming voice interrupted their private little chat, “You’re welcome to talk and debate your time away. How you spend your time won’t affect the rest of us.”

Professor Rueger flashed a wicked smirk, and the law students recoiled. Mia cringed too. They had been whispering quietly in the middle of the classroom—Mia clearly noted that the professor of this class had better hearing than a fox.

But the professor’s rebuke presented a chance for asking questions. Mia raised her hand and inquired, “Excuse me, Professor, the guidance papers say students will receive passing marks as long as they turn their papers in, but is it better to assume we won’t receive credit if our Grand Plan is written poorly?”

“Nope. All you gotta do is turn it in. You’ll pass even if you just turn in a blank sheet of paper—as long as you write your name on it. Your plan could be the worst piece of writing in the history of writing and you’ll still get a ‘good’ score. You just won’t be able to do your graduation research on that topic.”

“What do we do for our Graduation Thesis if we receive a passing or a good score on the plan?”

“Those who turn in a Grand Plan with only passing or good marks will be stuck devoting themselves to a research topic dictated by the professor in charge of the seminar they join.”

“Nothin’ worth sweating over then,” the law students approved, relieved by his answer.

But Mia visibly frowned. *How is that not something to sweat over?! This makes things more difficult than they should be!*

Ultimately, if a student’s Grand Plan didn’t receive the highest grade—Perfect—they wouldn’t be allowed to conduct the research they had gone through the effort of delineating in their Grand Plan. Mia had decided on her research topic since the day she planned to enroll in the Royal Academy. It wouldn’t be an

exaggeration to say she had enrolled in Isea Royal Academy for the sole purpose of researching that particular topic.

Basically, we can't take it easy even as a first year...

Professor Rueger was warning them that the Academy would take independence away from students without motivation. Things were even stricter than Mia had initially thought.

Color leaching from her face, Mia turned her attention back to the guidance packet. Just then, the classroom's back door rattled open.

"I'm Felix Keyserling. Sorry for being late."

Mia turned toward the cheerful voice, her eyes rounding. *He's the student from before... So he's the one who hasn't come for a whole month?!*

Standing in the doorway was the male student she had found crouching in a panic attack at the entrance ceremony. He donned a purple tie, signifying he was part of the law department, but he left it loose and his collar unbuttoned. He seemed to have mastered the casual look with his uniform, looking surprisingly not unfashionable in it, and exuded an air of ease like he was used to attending school. He ran his hand through his unruly golden hair, further messing it up, and brazenly searched for an empty seat, which he laid claim to like he was king of the room.

The lonely, empty space had finally been filled. By all appearances, it was the first time all the new students were present.

"Aah, you. Be a little more reserved when you enter the classroom next time." Professor Rueger sighed loudly.

A nearby student tried to hand Felix the guidance packet, but he refused, "Don't need it. I heard how it goes last year."

Last year? Oh, I get it now. The reason for his slightly worn-out uniform and confidence clicked. *He's repeating the school year.*

How were they supposed to treat him then? Everyone in class seemed to be wondering the same thing. Chatter filled the classroom where calm attentiveness had been before. Professor Rueger shrugged impatiently.

“Keyserling didn’t attend enough days because of his poor health, so he couldn’t move on to the next grade. He’s gone through the motions for a first year already, so he knows how everything goes. You can ask him for help for anything you don’t know.”

“Nice to meet ya,” Felix greeted, “You can ask me anything from what I recommend in the cafeteria, to how you can take roll for your friend so they can skip class.”

His intrepid answer didn’t seem like it belonged to a feeble person with poor health. But his panic attack crossed Mia’s mind. She worried instead that his overt behavior had something to do with it.

“Hey! Don’t go teaching them things they don’t need to know.”

Laughter erupted in the classroom at the friendly banter between Professor Rueger and Felix.

Felix didn’t seem to mind the fact that he had been held back a year. His carefree smile readily erased any reservations the class had about him. Mia felt similarly; treating him gingerly as some sort of anomaly would only be tiring for everyone involved, so it was better to start off casually and establish a friendly atmosphere.

After showering the classroom with his dreamy smile to earn a favorable impression, he glanced over—his eyes suddenly locked on Mia. And just when it seemed his eyes opened as wide as they could go, he made an expression as if he were the happiest man in the world.

H-Hey, what’s that look for?

For the first time in her life, Mia felt the urge to compare someone’s smile to a sunflower. He’d had a dark impression when she had met him, but that darkness was nowhere to be seen now. If she were going by first impressions alone, she’d claim he was a completely different person.

Factor in his ephemeral good looks and friendliness, and ten out of ten people would take a liking to him—that’s how bright and cheery he seemed now. Instinctively fascinated by him, Mia barely noticed the girls around her clamoring over him.

“Hey, do you think he’s the son of *the* Keyserling family? The ones listed in the Nobles’ Directory?”

“You’re talking about the Baron family who owns a large-scale plantation in the south? Is he the heir? ...Oh, what a shame, he’s the third son.”

Mia snapped back to her senses at the mixed sounds of disappointed and excited sighs from the group of female law students.

Taking classes with the prissy young ladies of the Law Department quickly taught Mia that none of them planned to go on to become members of parliament, the bureaucracy, or anything else remotely work-related after graduation. Then why did they bother attending the Royal Academy in the first place? Apparently: to assess the elite, young male students who advanced in becoming students of the Law and Magic Departments. In other words, they attended the Academy for the sole purpose of finding their future husbands. Mia couldn’t understand their world, but noblewomen’s futures were determined by their marriage. The Nobles’ Directory they carried on them at all times was essentially the guidebook to their ideal marriage. It’d spell disaster for them if they ever misplaced it.

According to the laws of Isea Kingdom, only the eldest son could inherit the family fortune and title. The second son on needed to find work for themselves instead, despite their status as noblemen. They attended Isea Royal Academy to secure a comfy job for their futures. And the daughters of nobles secured their futures through carefully plotted marriages to those noblemen.

I think it’s rather praiseworthy of them to work for their future, but it’s a huge drawback that they won’t inherit anything whatsoever. Maybe that’s what’s so disappointing to the noblewomen, Mia pondered as she glanced behind her. Directly behind her sat the extremely pretty law student from the registration line, the one who looked like she was made to model the Academy uniform.

Reality finally dawned on Mia. *Oh my gosh! So that was it! He was smiling at the group of girls behind me! It’s so obvious, I should’ve known! I’m so ashamed of myself for misunderstanding!* Flustered, she turned bright-red, dipped her head, and sank down in her seat so that her eyes were level with her guidance packet.

A clack of boots against the hard floors came closer. Mia heard a chair scraping across the floor as it was pushed back. The pretty girl seemed to have leapt up from her seat.

“Hello, I’m Angelica Heidfeld. I hope you can teach me *all* sorts of things.”

Mia was unconsciously charmed by her glimpse of Angelica’s perfectly crafted smile. Angelica’s fearless, bold gaze was the embodiment of her self-confidence. Any man would fall in love at first sight with her. Sure enough, Felix stopped in front of her. He raised an eyebrow before flashing a killer smile in return.

“Sure. Nice to meet you. I’m a law student too, so feel free to ask me anything.”

Phew! Thank goodness! My misunderstanding wasn’t found out. Mia self-consciously kept her head down, holding her hand over her hammering heart in relief.

However, Felix promptly put an end to his conversation with Angelica and returned, so that he was standing in front of Mia. Warning bells screaming inside her, Mia timidly lifted her head. His sunny smile was right in front of her now.

“Thanks for what you did for me before.”

“Uh...y-you mean me?”

“I thought I was going to die. You really saved me. You’re my savior.”

What an exaggeration! Mia’s cheek twitched.

“N-No, no one has died from a panic attack before... Besides...I merely...um... did what I could do for you.”

“But you saved me before anyone else.”

“Treating the person with the most serious condition is common sense.”

His sparkling smile was more blinding than the sun, it was so dazzling. Yet, at the same time, Mia could feel the painful pricks of every pair of eyes in the room burrowing into her. But Felix didn’t seem to notice or care, and he continued gazing at Mia with the innocent eyes of a puppy staring lovingly at

the person who had saved it from the rain. His eyes were like a clear blue lake, captivating to all who peered into them. It wouldn't have been unusual for Mia to lose herself in his eyes had they been alone together, but unfortunately, she wasn't so intoxicated by the situation as to lose sight of her situation or her surroundings.

Oh my gosh! QUIT IT! I want to live out my life here studying peacefully, without standing out as much as possible! At any rate, the haunting glares of the girls sitting directly behind her were terrifying. The temperature in the room had noticeably dropped several degrees—to the point her skin tingled and prickled. *Why doesn't he notice how scary they are?! Can this guy not read the mood?*

Mia racked her mind for a way out of this uncomfortable situation, cold sweat trickling down her neck. But nothing useful came to mind. *How do I get outta this mess?!*

"AH! Pen Thief!" a frosty voice sliced through the thick tension. A boy sitting two rows in front of Mia had turned around to send a piercing glare at her.

"Y-You're..."

She remembered those eyes; they were the color of fresh verdure, and hidden beneath platinum bangs. He was the medical student who had been waiting in line behind her during registration.

"Would you care to return my pen?"

Mia quietly groaned and rummaged through the bag at her feet. She only now remembered that she hadn't returned the pen she had borrowed to fill in her application. "Thanks for lending it." She leaned forward and held the pen out to him.

"Shouldn't you normally return what you borrow after you're done using it?" he grumbled, snatching his pen back before turning to face the front of the classroom again.

But his little outburst ended up saving Mia. Felix had returned to his seat while Mia's attention had been on the medical student.

"You've got serious nerve to interrupt class on top of being late to it,"

Professor Rueger reprimanded.

But relief had come too soon for Mia, because the stabbing glares from behind her only intensified. Not that it was unexpected. Mia herself had sunk into her chair from the shame of thinking she had misunderstood Felix's intentions. She would've wanted to flee the classroom had her misunderstanding been put on display for the entire class to see by doing something shameful, like if she had greeted Felix like Angelica. And for some reason, the brunt of the hatred these situations generated was never directed at the opposite sex, who had caused it, but at whoever was of the same sex.

I hope this doesn't turn into something annoying later. Not brave enough to glance behind her, Mia quietly sighed. Unfortunately, her bad feeling immediately came true.

"OBVIOUSLY, a pharma student should be able to do first-aid. I'd probably be able to do it if I tried too."

Students left the classroom in droves after class had ended. Mia heard that snide comment in passing as she stuffed class papers into her bag. She looked up and into perfectly straight golden locks and big emerald eyes—it was the law student Angelica. Contrary to her sweet appearance, she was a conceited, rich young lady who didn't mind letting the world know she was in charge.

I don't want to get involved with her type... While a part of Mia felt strongly about that, another part of her couldn't overlook Angelica's snarky remark. Treating injured or sick people with such a naïve outlook was dangerous.

Taking Felix's panicked hyperventilation lightly could've resulted in asphyxiation, then death. Just because something looked easy to handle didn't mean it actually was without experience. In medicine, experience made a world of difference.

Debating whether she should chase after Angelica to give her a piece of her mind—

"You've become the target of a nasty one." A comment from the medical student from before ended the debate.

Mia decided to direct her attention toward him instead. In her confusion, both her apology and gratitude had come out half-baked. Rather than ragging on some random girl for her stupidity, properly apologizing to and thanking someone would be far more constructive.

“Um, thanks for your pen. Sorry for giving it back to you late.”

The boy turned toward Mia and acted like he didn’t hear her. “You’re still walking around with that raggedy bag? Looks like a boiler exploded on the Academy uniform.” He looked down at his blazer for reference, then observed Mia with his verdure eyes.

I guess my shabby bag and the fashionable and avant-garde Academy uniform clash, Mia realized for the first time, her face turning red. Oh no! He just thought to himself that I have no sense of style! He’s right, but still!

Mentally lamenting the truth, Mia hid the bag behind her and objected, “It keeps me calm when I have it with me. Besides, I was able to quickly treat people thanks to it. It serves a purpose, doesn’t it?”

“Well, I can’t say it’s worthless, but yeah... Anyway, where did you learn first-aid? You were pretty competent with it.”

From the sound of it, he had witnessed Mia treating students at the entrance ceremony. Most of the new students didn’t realize it was Mia who had helped them. She’d walked by the people she had tended to, but no one said anything to her, so she figured they didn’t remember her. She was aware that her usual absentminded self and the mode she entered when providing treatment appeared like two completely different people, so she didn’t hold it against others for thinking so. A switch inside of her clicked on whenever she dealt with patients.

“I used to help out at a medical clinic,” Mia explained.

The boy raised his eyebrow curiously. “At your age?”

“I’m from a poor village. Everybody left to earn a living, so they were short-staffed.”

That was one reason why she had worked there. Without the good fortune of the clinic being short-staffed, they would’ve never let Mia stay there. There was

another reason for it too, but Mia cautiously kept her secrets to herself, as they weren't something you shared with somebody you've just met.

"Hmm. I see. I'm Henrik Vigant. A medical student as you can see," Henrik said, pointing to his blue tie.

"I'm Mia Baumann, a pharmacology student. I hope we can be friends now."

"I doubt we'll see each other much, being in different departments and all," Henrik replied curtly, then left, waving her off as if to say not to follow him into the hallway.

He may have been bitter about it, but he had lent Mia his pen and—while she might've just been getting ahead of herself—he'd even casually helped her out in class. She was convinced he was a good person. She was used to blunt people who said what they meant, thanks to the brusque doctor who had taken her in, and she didn't dislike those who were straight with her. With a hop in her step, she followed him outside.

ONCE the lectures mandatory for all departments ended, students moved from the building in the middle of campus, known as Central Hall, to the buildings housing the various departments. Each department's dedicated building was known as the department's hall. The building that got the best sunlight was to the southeast, home to the Law Hall. To the southwest stood the Magic Hall. Northeast housed the Medical Hall, and Pharmacology Hall was built to the northwest, completing the set. For convenience's sake, lectures and courses for general education took place in Central Hall, constructed with the auditorium where assemblies were held as well.

Bronze statues lined the scarcely populated hallways. Mathias had once heard that the bronze statues depicted successive generations of the Academy's principals or presidents, but it didn't matter to him who the bronze faces were meant to be. His interests lay with the golden head he watched appear and disappear from the statues' shadows, and the person the head belonged to.

Felix Keyserling stared furtively out the window at the Pharmacology Hall, his unruly golden hair reflecting the sunlight spilling in through the dormer windows. His complete lack of awareness of how much he stood out hadn't

changed since they were kids. He'd always sucked at hiding, and was always found first whenever they'd played hide-and-seek. But while hiding to spy on someone could be written off as cute for a child, now it meant he was a creeper. Mathias sighed, irritated.

If you want to hide, dig a hole or somethin' to hide yourself completely. If you want to be stealthy, then go through with your camouflage properly! Doing everythin' half-assed's the number one way to failure...

Mathias kept an eye on Felix while pretending to be fascinated by the fliers posted on the hallway bulletin wall. Fliers attached to fist-sized zeppelins vroomed across the wall-length track for his attention. Out of the corner of his eye he saw two zeppelins crash into each other in a small explosion of hydrogen. What was left of their fliers was scooped up by another zeppelin.

"Mia Baumann...Mia." Felix muttered as if he were speaking the name of the most important thing in the world. His voice sounded sweeter than honey, to the point that Mathias felt it would inflict heartburn on whoever heard. Maybe that's the real reason why the zeppelins exploded...

"And Henrik Vigant. I won't forget your name," Felix growled, his tone dropping several octaves as if he were chanting a curse.

Henrik had gallantly taken the initiative while Felix had been debating whether or not he should speak to Mia. From his nonchalant, timely rescue during class, to his immediate self-introduction, Mathias wasn't sure what Henrik was after, but he knew Henrik would prove a formidable rival.

Gnashing his teeth, Felix stepped out of the shadows. Mathias matched his timing to walk away from the bulletin wall. Zeppelins zoomed after him until their track ran out and they had no choice but to wait for someone else to take the fliers they were responsible for.

Barely anyone was left in the hallways. Bells had rung not too long ago to signal there was less than a minute until the next class. Mathias pretended he was in a hurry and lined up beside Felix.

As he passed by Felix, he whispered, "Henrik Vigant took the top score on the entrance exams."

Felix unabashedly wrinkled his brow. By no means was he bad at schoolwork, but...since he was little, he'd failed to concentrate on anything that hadn't piqued his interest, creating absurd inconsistencies with his grades. He was an extreme case of someone who'd barely gotten accepted to the Royal Academy, since he had obtained an average score by receiving a hundred percent on half the tests and zero on the other half. He was either a genius or a lucky idiot.

Felix was convinced that he was an idiot, but the truth was that he was the opposite. As an average person, Mathias really wanted to yell, "Don't you dare call yourself an idiot when you don't even put in a second of effort!"

"You know he stole all the right moments from right under you, yeah?" Mathias informed him, "Are you a moron? You totally creeped her out."

"Was she creeped out? Why? How's that possible when I acted out everything written right here perfectly?!"

Felix flipped open the book he hid inside his textbook. A quick glimpse of the book's spine revealed the dreadful title, "Let's Become Popular with the Ladies!" Where in the world had he gotten ahold of a book like this? The front cover was unusually antiquated, and the illustration of a cocky boy in a top hat giving a thumbs-up on the cover looked like it had been drawn in another generation.

"...Come on, man." Mathias carefully snatched the dangerous book from Felix's hands, narrowing his eyes. Felix was unusually motivated about doing something, but he was obviously going the wrong way about it. "Relying on trash like this is only gonna make you stand out in a bad way. I mean, dude, keeping up that unnaturally refreshing, happy-go-lucky act will take its toll on you. Think about the consequences."

"...I just want to get to know her better is all," Felix whimpered. He looked like a scolded puppy.

"Then take action once you assess the situation. You put her on the spot, y'know?"

Felix's parents had sent Mathias undercover to help him graduate properly, but there were already a mountain of problems, and it stank of more to come.

As it was, Felix suffered from a chronic illness. The attacks he had since childhood were bad for his heart. Mathias cursed his childhood self for standing by and doing nothing because he hadn't known better. That's why he'd found himself so impressed by the miracle treatment the girl—Mia Baumann—had given him.

Inevitably, Mathias had been bothered by the nauseating, revolting malice he'd felt clogging up the classroom after Felix's stupid stunt.

He gave words to his greatest fear. "That girl...might be bullied because of you. Take at least the bare minimum responsibility for what you've done."

Imprisoned in the strict Academy's narrow confines, students utterly lacking in discretion took their depression and irritation out on the weak. It was a world where those with power exploited those without on a daily basis. Mathias could see a huge target on Mia's back. The possibility of her as their next prey was huge. Felix shouldn't have wanted that for her.

"I know." Felix nodded before jogging past Mathias. They had different department-related classes next, so Felix took the fork in the hallway towards the Law Hall. Mathias proceeded to the Magic Hall.

Mathias warned the overly enthusiastic Felix, "You say you know, but do you get that you need to do it from the shadows? Otherwise you'll have the opposite effect. You're *Felix Keyserling* right now. Do you get what that means?"

Felix was currently nothing more than a middle-tier noble. He was in the middle, when power and authority flowed from the top of society. In other words, he had no choice but to listen to what the top-tier nobles said. Mathias wasn't sure if his comment had reached him or not, but Felix had tensed like a bolt of lightning passed through him. And then he ran off again. Mathias thought he saw Felix give a slight nod before disappearing.

His ability to listen to others was one of the good things about him, but—

"Nothing good comes from being too obedient either. It's because you accept everythin' straight on that you end up shouldering heavy burdens you never needed to take on."

Why did Felix have to suffer so much for an accident that was nobody's fault? Mathias remembered when Felix had locked himself alone in his room and rotted away from his anguish.

A year passed and his attacks had quieted down. But just like the incident a month ago, the attacks would recur for some reason or another. They'd never pinpointed what exactly triggered them. Whenever Mathias thought about those repressed feelings, eating away at Felix like a ticking-time bomb underneath his cheerful smile, his chest squeezed like someone had stabbed him.

"If you want to say what happened was your fault, then I have the greater sin to bear for running away from becoming a mage."

And that was why Mathias stayed with Felix despite all his complaining. He was frightened to death that he might see his best friend break down again—and not get back up. He'd already lost one friend—he wouldn't lose another.

Chapter 3: Cycle of Malice

IT all *began* during herbology class. Gears in the belfry clicked in place signaling the clapper to strike the bell marking the end of class. Mia reached for her folder to file away her classwork—only to find that the bag she should’ve placed beside her was missing.

Goose bumps prickled across her arm as her hand grasped empty air where her bag once sat. Thinking she must’ve dropped it, Mia dropped to her knees on the ground and wildly searched the floor under the desks and chairs, but the bag was nowhere to be found.

Gone! It’s gone! Why?!

Her classmates eyed her suspiciously as they left class for lunch at the cafeteria. But Mia wasn’t in the mood to care about what they thought of her as she rummaged through the trashcans. Maybe someone had thrown it away because of how old and shabby it looked.

She searched the classrooms next door as well, and even scoured the classrooms down the hall so that she left no room or desk unturned throughout the Pharmacology Hall, but her bag refused to be found.

Mia felt like she was about to drown in her despair as she headed to the Law Hall’s common room after school. The luxurious room was lit perfectly by the sun, and contained everything you’d expect for the Law Department’s prestige. A mountain of delicacies and expensive sweets sat upon lace cloth covered tables. The rich smell of freshly baked cookies and lavender butter intermingled with the soft scent of hot tea.

Felix spotted her and happily came right over. “What’s wrong? Do you need something from the Law Hall?” he asked.

Mia was glad to have finally come across someone she could share her concerns with. “I can’t find my bag. Have you seen it? It’s an incredibly old,

worn-out bag. I thought I might've left it behind when I went to my next class," she explained through her distress.

Without being a law student, she didn't have permission to search every nook and cranny of Law Hall. She was about to ask Felix to help her search—but bit her tongue.

Angelica appeared beside Felix in all her glory. Her big emerald eyes narrowed doubtfully on Mia. "*Pharm* people don't come near our common room, do they? Are you *absolutely* certain you don't have the wrong idea?" Angelica interrupted, smiling. She was smiling, but blatant rejection oozed from the cracks in her sweet façade.

"*Get out.*" Mia grimaced, detecting what Angelica really meant to say.

"You're right. Sorry. I probably...forgot it at the dorm."

There were still places she hadn't searched yet. Backing down, Mia dejectedly turned around to leave for Pharmacology Hall again.

But she found herself spinning around in surprise when a hand grabbed her shoulder.

"I'll search Law Hall for you. Don't worry." Felix peered worriedly at her face.

Feeling like she was about to cry, Mia lowered her eyes. "Thanks."

She was genuinely happy he offered to help. But when Mia sensed Angelica's snakelike, predatory glare homing in on her, the reality of the situation abruptly dawned on her. Reality was that her bag might never show up again. And if that were the case, the boy in front of her was most likely the cause.

THE cycle of malice spreads unknown to the target. Not unlike an infectious disease.

Ultimately, it was Felix who brought her precious bag back to her. According to him, someone had dropped the bag off at the faculty room's lost and found bin. But Mia wasn't so optimistic or naïve as to take his explanation seriously.

Classmates she had thought were acting cold that first day stopped talking to her altogether the next; today, when she had sat down in one of her

pharmacology classes, the students nearby restlessly shoved their seats backwards, rising to move several rows away from her. Even after every other seat had been full, those in Mia's row remained empty. Students preferred to stand at the back of the classroom than sit near her.

Her awful situation wasn't limited to her department's classes either—general education classes were no exception. Rather, the silent treatment had begun *from* the general education classes, and had apparently spread outwards to infect her department. Those with ill-will, like a germ, made contact with others, infecting them with their malice from the inside out.

I knew it. I wasn't wrong about what happened to my bag... Stealing her bag had only been the beginning. They were now trying to isolate her from the rest of the Academy. *Then the person instigating all of this has to be—*

Mia recalled how Angelica acted when they met in Law Hall's common room. Accompanying Angelica's fake, dismissive smile had been eyes filled with contempt at having to look upon a revolting, irritating maggot she couldn't shake off.

As she wasn't a noble, the exact depths of disparity between them was far too great for Mia to grasp intuitively, but from what she could understand, Angelica was the young lady of an especially powerful noble family, even among the law students. Everyone within the Law Department, with the exclusion of Felix, appeared to have taken her side. If Angelica was influential enough to control the Law Department, the Academy's "Right Wing"—the expanse of buildings curved around Central Hall on the right, mirrored by the buildings of the Magic Department on its left—it would be a walk in the park for her to similarly seize control over all the first-year students. And she had.

The Royal Academy was structured around influence; a microcosm of Isea Kingdom's social status dynamics. Only utter fools would disobey the hierarchy—everyone was implicitly pressured to take the easiest path. Luckily, the microcosm was a strictly social existence when it really came down to it. Isea Royal Academy formally declared all students to be equal—though whether it was truly their official stance or merely a pretense was up for debate. Without the official stance protecting her individuality, Mia would've fled out the gates in despair due to her position, which was at the bottom of the lowest tier.

Blegh... I've just gotta accept it as it is.

Mia let out a small sigh. She was already used to heartless bullying from her childhood. All she could do was look for the silver lining: with everyone ignoring her, she wouldn't have to deal with a buttload of annoyances that spending time with others inevitably entailed. So, Mia tried to convince herself that she didn't need anybody. But days on end without talking to someone—anyone—gradually took their toll on her.

Her Academy life, which should've been brimming with her hopes and dreams, rapidly exchanged its fantastical, promising colors for the glum darkness of hopeless melancholy. Felix spoke to her whenever they had the occasional general education class together, but the warmer those conversations were, the more intensely she felt her misery when she returned to isolation. Not to mention that Felix was the very source of her miserable situation to begin with. Dagger-like glares stabbed at her whenever she was with him, pushing deeper and deeper with each encounter, so while she felt bad for doing so, she began avoiding him.

Unable to stand the loneliness at times, Mia tried to start up conversations with Henrik, but in typical Henrik fashion, he was curt towards her as he was everyone, living in his own little world. Sometimes he even wore earplugs to help him concentrate, so it felt no different from talking to a wall when she attempted to speak to him.

Worst of all, whenever she was with him, he was alienated from the rest of the Academy too. Terrified of what would happen if they started bullying him next, Mia quit talking to him as well. By the time autumn was coming to a close, Mia found herself isolated from not only the Pharmacology Department, but the entire student body within her year.

THE front quad south of the Academy's Central Hall was being beautifully decorated for the upcoming Winter Solstice Celebration next month. When the trees dropped their leaves, students replaced them by hanging up gold and silver tinsel. Yet, amid the jubilation of excited students, Mia was all alone. She despised passing through the festive front quad, so she took the route through

the back quad stationed to the north of Central Hall instead. The barren and undecorated trees that seemed to shiver from being forgotten reflected herself.

Regardless, as long as Mia concentrated on schoolwork, she could forget all of her horrible feelings, so she was excelling in her studies at least. Thanks to her practical work experience and the knowledge about medicine and herbs the clinic had given her, her grades had quickly raced to the top of the entire Pharmacology Department. Professors and other faculty recognized her gifts and respected her.

But Mia soon realized she couldn't continue fooling herself by believing that her problems would eventually go away. Classes were always assigning group projects, whether they were for labs or papers. She had figured out how to handle those on her own, but there was one thing she couldn't do that for—her foremost objective: writing the Graduation Thesis' Grand Plan.

"There's no way you will let me do it alone?" Mia pleaded with Professor Rueger.

Each student research team would choose a team leader, and the leader's assigned department professor would be responsible for the group's Grand Plan. Being the only person in her team, Mia had to turn her proposal in to a Pharmacology Department professor. And of all luck, she had the misfortune of having Professor Rueger, who was said to be the strictest of the entire Pharmacology Department, as the one overseeing her Grand Plan.

Professor Rueger's office was on the first floor of Pharmacology Hall. Magic Hall loomed directly over the building to the south, blocking out most of the sunlight, so his office was kept dimly dark. A chill always seemed to linger in the room. All the walls had been turned into bookshelves, which reached all the way to the twenty-foot tall ceiling and were stuffed full of books. Professor Rueger used a crank-controlled stepladder to reach the top levels of his shelves. The colossal bookshelves were so intimidating and oppressive, Mia found herself nervously imagining what would happen if an earthquake hit and it started raining books on them.

Although Mia had visited his office more times than she could count, she still wasn't used to it.

And just like his office, Professor Rueger broke the scale for intimidation. His stern eyebrows were always positioned at an angry angle, his ash-gray eyes glinting sharply behind his round spectacles. He had taken but a single glimpse at the report paper Mia had brought in before tossing it in the trash.

“Aaaah! You’re awful! Please stop doing that! At least read it first before throwing it away!”

“Accepting a proposal from a single-person team is out of the question, so I don’t need to waste my time reading it.”

“Why can’t I be on a team alone?!”

“Because that’s the rule.”

He was an impenetrable wall. He had earned himself the title of the Wall. Mia had informed him that she wanted to write up the Grand Plan on her own and had brought him prototypes on countless occasions, but he never humored her by looking it over. Instead, he doggedly told her that she wasn’t allowed to do it alone.

“Why? I can come up with a topic without a team. Research is possible without one too. You will see why if you just look at my draft!” She picked her paper off the top of the trash and thrust it at him.

Professor Rueger scoffed at her plea. “You’re a brilliant student. I’ll give you that much. Your grades in traditional pharmaceutical subjects, such as herbology, are undisputedly excellent. You’ve got a knack for refining chemicals and drugs in experiments, and your scores for tests and reports in other fundamental sciences are also nothing to complain about... But for what purpose did you enroll?”

Mia already knew the answer to the question he tossed at her. It was clearly written on the Grand Plan prototype that she shook in front of him. “Obviously because I want to develop a medicine.”

“Can you create a new medicine alone?”

Mia was stuck. Her experience was in harvesting herbs, which she already knew the properties and effects of, refining them into an herbal medicine, and prescribing it according to what it was for. Producing a new medicine—whether

herbal or chemical—from scratch would require a completely different process.

She had researched the process for creating medicine when she'd written up her Grand Plan prototypes. Pharmacists must search for effective ingredients from a number of natural substances to refine, then continually repeat clinical experiments, on animals and humans, with the end product to ascertain whether it produces a medicinal effect. At the same time, testing is required in order to discern the medicine's side effects at different toxicity levels. Mia could easily imagine the tremendous amount of time, money, and effort that went into the process of making drugs that could be safely approved.

Moreover, the disease Mia wanted to cure was one nobody had found a cure for yet. No one knew the disease's cause or how it could be alleviated, much less cured.

"If you're dead set on creating a new medicine, you'll need connections and friends to do it—it can't be done alone. The moment you were incapable of forming a team was the moment you failed to even scratch the surface of your goal." Professor Rueger shoved the report back at her again.

It felt like he was saying she had failed as a human being. Mia ran out of his office.

"REMEMBER this well, Mia. When I die, all I can leave behind for you is this bag. The rest is up to you. You must believe in yourself and advance onward. As long as you don't give up, there will come a day when you will see your mother on the other side of those walls. You can count on it." Doctor Letts' words replayed inside her head as she ran down the hallway, the sound of her footsteps echoing through the halls.

It had been the first time the strict Doctor Letts had addressed her with such kind words... Several days later, he suddenly succumbed to his illness. Thinking back on it now, he most likely told her that because he had known he was going to die.

By the time Mia had been old enough to form memories, her dad was already gone. And when her mother was taken behind those massive walls, Doctor Letts of the local medical clinic had taken her under his wing. Under the pretense of

training her to be his assistant, he had let her live at the clinic and eventually help with his work. At the time, she had been a six-year-old child incapable of doing anything. In hindsight, their situation had only been possible because they were living in the middle of nowhere, a vast distance from the capital. The ten years she had lived with Doctor Letts were longer than the years she'd spent with her mom, so she came to view him as her real parent.

Once this guardian who had raised her passed away, the new doctor of the clinic chased Mia out. Doctor Letts must've known that she would be tossed out on the streets upon his death. That was why he'd entrusted her with his shabby old bag. Inside the bag, he had left his will and money he'd secretly saved up for the past ten years for her. Mia had insisted she was happy with just working for a place to live, but he had personally saved money from his wages to give to his inexperienced apprentice.

His will simply said, "Go to Isea Royal Academy. Ascertain the truth with your own eyes. In doing so, you will undoubtedly see your mother on the other side of those walls." Supported by those words, Mia studied for the Academy's entrance exams for half a year as if her life had counted on it.

I won't ever see Mom again if I give up now. So...I can't afford to lose to them.

Sucking back her tears and gritting her teeth, Mia headed for Central Hall. The bell rang, signaling the start of class. Her next class was a combined course for medical students and pharmacology students called "The History of Drug Development".

Assistant Professor Einz was already preparing the class for Professor Rueger's lecture. "Oh, Mia, it's rare for you to be late. Hurry to your seat."

Professor Einz, the assistant professor who had treated her cordially at the entrance ceremony, was on the pharmacology faculty. Her spectacles glinted blue, and her eyes were a stunning purple. She handed Mia some papers that were titled, "The Bruckstadt Conflict and the Onset of Angel Tears".

The Bruckstadt Conflict referred to the war between Isea Kingdom and the neighboring kingdom of Radius, the Kingdom of the Sun. Skirmishes had been fought constantly on the border between the two kingdoms, which were connected by one long, massive bridge. Radius finally fell in the final clash to

Isea's mighty Mage Brigade, and was subsequently absorbed into Isea Kingdom. Obtaining Radius' fertile land and ample, large rivers, Isea Kingdom rose to the level of a world power. But it was during that final battle, a hundred years ago, that the first outbreak of the incurable disease, Angel Tears, struck.

Apparently, they were continuing from the last lesson, but Mia rocked uncomfortably on her feet, irritation writhing inside her at the biased explanation.

Incurable disease? Who are they kidding? How do you call a disease that already has medicine to restrain it "incurable"?

What about the inhumane treatment she had received as a child then? The burning lump she normally forced down bubbled ferociously from her core, threatening to cook her from the inside out. Mia forced a lid on the boiling rage—but instead of going to her seat, she stood in front of the professor's podium.

"Everyone." Mia's firm voice drew the attention of the class. She bowed her head, hoping her words would reach them. "I have a favor to ask of you. I want you to write up a Grand Plan with me."

"....."

No response. Worse—after a momentary pause, the classroom filled with purposeful chatter to drown her out.

"Please!" Nobody was willing to listen. Even so, Mia kept her head bowed. "I'm begging you! All you have to do is lend me your name and that's enough. I'll do the rest by myself!"

The students chattered even louder. Disheartened, tears misted Mia's eyes.

"Quiet down," Professor Einz called, restoring silence to the classroom. "Mia, just asking for help with your Grand Plan without telling them the topic isn't going to get anyone to volunteer. You need to tell them your topic if you want them to listen to you."

Professor Einz helped her out, just like the time at the entrance ceremony. Could she sense how tormented Mia was? How much Mia had desperately hoped that someone may do this for her? Mia frantically rubbed away the tears that had escaped. A sliver of her calm was restored.

“Umm...”

The memories locked away in the depths of her heart broke free; she hesitated to say more. What she was about to say contained the name of the most abhorred thing in all of Isea. Adults forbade saying it, believing that its utterance would curse them, so that only children who hadn't yet learned to fear it dared to say its name aloud. Only in disgust did anyone ever speak of it—if they dared.

“Her Ma's a—”

“Yuck! Get away from me! I'll catch it!”

“Plague bearer!”

“You're worse than corpse-eating rats!”

Those had been the heartless comments from other children that had stabbed through Mia's heart. Doctor Letts had been the one who comforted and encouraged her whenever she had cried her heart out.

“People will come to understand if you talk it through with them. Be patient and don't lose your temper. Patience is especially key to reaching your goals.”

Mia remembered his words clearly, kindness hid in his eyes despite his stern expression. *I can do this. My classmates aren't children. They're very smart too. They're supposed to be the future generation of this kingdom!*

Mia took a deep breath, then exhaled, hesitation leaving her body with the air. “I...want to create a cure for Demon Claw.”

Fierce disgust swept across the entire class the very second she mentioned her topic. Demon Claw—rumored to be a curse left behind by Radius' annihilated royalty—was just as catastrophic as Angel Tears. The disease attacked the immune system, dismantling it until, eventually, even a common cold proved fatal. The worst part was that it was highly infectious and contagious through touch. As no treatment existed yet, those who were discovered to have contracted it were dragged off to the Sanatorium, to be quarantined until death. Unlike Angel Tears, the disease wasn't limited to mages, thus it was the most feared and despised disease in all of Isea Kingdom.

“Demon...Claw?” Even Professor Einz brought her hand to her mouth, grimacing with disgust at the disease’s name. “Why...would you try to cure that abominable disease...?”

Mia flinched from Professor Einz’s reaction, but she held onto Doctor Letts’ words and shook off her fears. She was certain she could get them to understand. She wanted them to know of her conviction, her passions, of what kept her motivated, and she wanted their help once they understood.

“My mom has the disease. I...came to the Academy in order to save my mom!”

Outrage erupted in the class.

“GET OUT! GET OUT OF HERE RIGHT NOW!” someone shrieked hysterically.

“Get outta here!” another yelled.

Mia’s eyes widened with shock. Their reaction was the same rejection she had received from other children as a child; they were utterly repulsed.

I don’t believe it. This can’t be happening. I mean these are supposed to be the future doctors and pharmacists of the world...

The students in this class wouldn’t have been admitted to the Academy if they hadn’t possessed the bare minimum medical knowledge. And when the slashing incident caused by the student afflicted with Angel Tears was brought up at the school-wide assembly, the faculty had reminded the student body to hate the disease, not the patient. Wasn’t that what they were taught? Hadn’t the entire student body agreed?

“LEAVE! Who the HELL would wanna partner with you?! What’re ya gonna do if we all catch it now?!”

Panic shot through the classroom, faster than any illness.

“I...I...I’m not infected!” Mia frantically argued.

“How the hell should we know?! Professor Einz! That woman’s dangerous! Please take her away and quarantine her immediately!”

Mia spun towards the professor. “Professor Einz... You understand that’s not how it works, right?!” she pleaded.

But Professor Einz reflexively jolted away from her, adding fuel to the classroom mob's hysteria.

"LEAVE! GET OUT! GET OUT!"

Their shouts grew so loud that Mia could no longer hear. The uproar had attracted students from other departments, who now surrounded Mia at a distance, horrified. Searching for any ally against the faceless wall of enemies, Mia spotted Henrik and turned her eyes to him, begging for help. Someone as smart as Henrik should understand—is what Mia had hoped, but Henrik was completely out of commission, oblivious to the riot in his own little world. His eyes were still on the textbook, in the back corner of the classroom. Earplugs in, he didn't hear them.

It's too late. I can't accomplish anything here. Her dreams had been smashed to pieces, and with it, her mom's life. Her legs buckled under her.

Someone grabbed Mia's arm.

"Are you guys morons or what?"

It was Felix. He had appeared out of nowhere, fiercely pulling Mia's arm upwards to keep her from collapsing to the ground. He was holding her up.



“Lord Felix, you mustn’t go near her!” someone screamed behind him—Angelica debated whether to dash into the classroom to stop him, but decided to stay at the perimeter with the other students, where it was *safe*. “She said a member of her family is infected with Demon Claw! She must have it—”

“And that’s why I said you’re all morons.” Dark, furious contempt glinted in Felix’s eyes. “She never would’ve gotten accepted to the Academy if she had been infected. We all had background checks and medical exams before attending, *just in case*. Or did *you* skip out on *yours*?” he spat violently. “Hang on, hang on. Aren’t you people all supposed to be from the Medical and Pharmacology Departments? Aren’t you *ashamed* of flaunting your ignorance? Or what? You *trying* to get known as ignoramuses?”

Felix was shouting—he had no intention of keeping his vehement rage in check. In its wake was silence; nobody could believe Felix, who always smiled amiably, would insult them with such fury, glaring at them with vibrant hatred in his eyes. Most of the students had shut up, uncomfortably shuffling in their chairs or looking away.

Mia felt as if Felix was lifting her heart out of the dark depths of depression, but before it rose halfway to the sunny surface, she felt it sink, tumbling down again.

“GET OUT!”

Demon Tears was unquestionably a contagious disease. However, it was spread through touch—the government claimed they were taking proper measures to keep it quarantined, the proof of which Mia could confirm herself, for every day she saw Professor Letts in perfect health after handling the infected.

Her classmates were no different from ignorant village children. Actually, their prejudice was even worse. Mia now realized how careless it had been to tell them of her situation, but it was too late to undo what had been done.

It was the disease that should be feared and hated; nobody chose to become infected. She couldn’t stand to see the sick disrespected by a horde of entitled teenagers.

“I haven’t...seen my mom...for ten years...since she went to...the Sanatorium. So...there’s no way I could...be infected.”

Mia’s chest squeezed painfully at the memories of her mother. She’d been apart from her mom since she was six. No matter how much she had begged and pleaded to see her mom who was quarantined on the other side of the towering, sterile walls, they had always refused her, saying she’d get infected. For ten whole years, the only way she had been able to connect, to *feel* her mother, was through cold, soundless, limp letters. And now, with Doctor Letts dead, Mia would never again get to receive or send a letter.

Mom. Mom. Mommy... Tears gushed, spilling down her cheeks. It was embarrassing, frustrating. She fished through her pockets for a handkerchief.

“Don’t cry.” Felix rubbed her face with his handkerchief before Mia found hers.

“Thank...” Before she could add “you”, Felix touched a finger to her lips through the handkerchief, sealing the word. He gazed directly into her eyes and smiled softly.

“You don’t need to thank me. Let’s be honest, the fault for all of this traces back to me. Sorry. I was told that getting involved would only make it worse for you, but I couldn’t manage to sit this one out... Ack, he’s gonna rail on me later.”

Who’s he talking about? Mia wondered. He didn’t have to apologize to her either. From the very beginning to now, he had gone out of his way to talk to her, to be her friend. She arbitrarily shut him out.

She was about to apologize to Felix in return when a low voice beat her to it. “Sorry it took me so long to notice,” Henrik mumbled, looking incredibly uncomfortable. Mia hadn’t noticed he had even come over to them. He’d spoken so quietly, she thought she’d misheard him.

Henrik immediately averted his eyes, turning his head away. “Won’t you write up this year’s Grand Plan with me?” he asked in a barely audible whisper.

Felix’s eyes widened; he was struck speechless.

“Really? You sure?!” Mia’s entire face lit up. It was a heaven-sent offer. But

there was a problem—could students from different departments form a team? Mia looked to Professor Einz for the answer.

Professor Einz snapped back to her senses and shook her head. “You can’t.”

“No, they can,” Professor Rueger interrupted her from the doorway. He had also been drawn by the ruckus. His lips curled into a grin under his mustache. “There’s no precedent for it, but the Medical Department and Pharmacology Department, or the Law Department and Magic Department for that matter, can team up without issue. We can anticipate a more profound topic and higher-quality research from multiple departments.”

“Are you serious?!” Felix exclaimed. He stepped between Henrik and Mia and immediately offered, “Then I’ll join you too! Oh yeah, while we’re at it, why don’t you join us, Mathias? You were just lamenting about how you couldn’t pick a topic.”

As if he had been summoned, the giant mage suddenly appeared from the shadows—how and where he had managed to hide his bearlike body was anyone’s guess.

Mia faltered, “Huuuuuuuh...?! ”

Medical students and pharmacology students working together at least made sense. Sure, law students and mage students could probably help out with clinical studies, but she was sure the moment they joined the team, all chaos would break loose. But she was grateful for the kind gesture.

“...Honestly, you’ll just get in our way,” Henrik replied irritably. “What good is an ignorant, rich young master who’s a law student? Let’s not forget you’re a horrible student who’s repeating a year too. And I can’t even fathom how we could make use of a mage who’s wasting his talent so much so that the only thing he has going for him is his physique.”

Mia gulped. Apparently, Henrik was the type of person who went too far by saying what he thought exactly how he thought it. She panicked over how she could best smooth things over before they spiraled out of control.

“I can’t let you keep taking all the good moments from me! They call what you’re doing ‘butting in!’” Felix refused to back down.

“You’ve seriously got bad tastes,” Henrik muttered at the discouraged Felix.

Mia realized they were talking about her when they shot glances her way, but she honestly had no objection; she thought Henrik was spot on. Mia didn’t think that what she had done for Felix warranted this degree of attachment. It just didn’t add up.

A large hand came to rest on her exhausted shoulder. “He won’t take no for an answer once he sets his mind to something. You’d be wise to give in now.” Mia looked over her shoulder. It was the big mage. “I’m Mathias Weiss. A mage. I still haven’t decided on a topic yet, so I’ll be joining ya. Let’s put up with each other for this year.”

For whatever reason, he was going along with Felix’s suggestion. *He’s requesting the unreasonable...and what’s their relationship, anyway?*

Mia’s disbelief must have shown plainly on her face, because he added, “I’m curious about Demon Claw. Research on Angel Tears is commonplace at this Academy, but no one does anythin’ with Demon Claw.”

Standing beside the big guy, the relatively tall and well-built Felix looked short and fragile in comparison. Henrik, with his average height and size, looked even tinier.

“Yeah,” Henrik agreed, “or more like the Academy refuses to accept anything but Angel Tears as our graduation research. They won’t give out research funds for anything else. Well, it’s not *unreasonable* considering why the Medical and Pharmacology Departments were even founded, but Angel Tears has been exhausted. Done to death. This topic is far more interesting, being untouched and all.”

The corner of his lips ever-so-slightly turned up. Mia’s eyes rounded; it was the first smile she had seen from him. Henrik had the heart and mind of a researcher. There was curiosity twinkling in his clever verdure eyes. Relief like no other flooded Mia; she had gained a reliable ally.

She glanced back to Felix, to find a dark shadow on his face. His clenched fists were trembling. Wondering what was wrong, she observed his expression carefully. He noticed her and flashed his trademark sunny smile.

Was I just imagining things? His forlorn expression had reminded her of the first time they'd met—when he suffered from a panic attack.

The simple and naïve side of Felix acted like he didn't have a single care in the world, while the gloomy Felix reflected the dark shadows of someone who had peered into the dark depths of Hell. Which was the real him? As Mia pondered that question, Professor Rueger's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"We haven't had much of a class today. Let's leave the remainder for your homework. Each of you will need to submit a report on the history of drug development."

"Nooooooooooooooooo!" Cries burst from the classroom, loud enough to rattle the floorboards. Mia felt the hostile stares from every student, blaming her for the extra assignment. She had to stop herself from making a relieved smile.

Their anger was easier to handle than silent treatment and isolation. Actually, it was way easier.

"Sorry," Mia quietly apologized.

"You'd better make it up to us," one of the male students demanded awkwardly, sulking. It was the student who had first yelled at her to get out.

Yep. This is also way better than listening to them yell at me to leave.

"Okay," she said. She felt like crying, but for a completely different reason.

Following his lead, other pharmacology students surrounded her with complaints. Mia felt that this was their way of making a roundabout apology, so while she outwardly asked for forgiveness meekly, she wept for joy inside.

I'm so grateful to Professor Rueger for giving me this opportunity—well actually, I'm not sure if he did—but for pushing me to make friends, and to Professor Einz for giving me a chance to speak up for myself. And...

Mia looked at Felix. He was wearing a mixed smile, complex feelings coloring his relief.

"Are you guys morons or what?"

His words had shone a ray of light into her darkness. Mia was grateful to him from the bottom of her heart for protecting her so boldly against the

aggressive, jeering mob. The sight of his reliable back was burnt into her heart, secretly changing her initial impression of him.

Chapter 4: Graduation Research Topic

THE library located at the northernmost end of the campus was crammed full of students busy writing the report Professor Rueger suddenly assigned them. Mia and the three boys with her were no exception, so they settled in for the long haul in the corner of one of the study rooms.

The frigid temperatures of Isea's capital were warded off by a chain of coal burning furnaces, arranged in a network of tunnels built under the city. The generated heat was distributed through a system of pipes, which warmed individual rooms with rising steam. This system heated the entire Royal Academy, and the corner of the study rooms were the coziest because it was at the intersection of dark-gray pipes coiled along the walls.

Professor Rueger had ordered everyone who'd disturbed his class to write a report on the history of drug development, including the law student Felix and the Mage Mathias, who were at a complete loss since their departments had nothing to do with drugs. Sensing their predicament, Mia had invited them to the library, suggesting it'd be faster to work together. They wouldn't have to officially borrow the books if they just used them in the study room, making it the ideal place to gather research for their reports.

Unbelievably, Felix had never used the library before. He glanced curiously at everything. Mia looked at his still hands and arched her eyebrow.

"Hey, your paper is still blank. Are you going to do this or not?"

An hour had passed since they left class to work on their reports, but Felix's paper lacked a single word.

"Why should I? A report on the 'History of Drug Development' won't affect my grades."

He exasperated Mia. Sure, he had a point, but then why hadn't he just said so from the start?

“Then why’d you even come with me?” she asked, a slight edge to her voice.

“Obviously because I wanted to be with you, Mia.”

“...Excuse me?”

“Because I wanted to be with you, Mia?” Felix tilted his head and smiled.

Heat rushed to Mia’s cheeks. She wasn’t accustomed to hearing anything of the sort, so she didn’t know how to react. As she was stuck, searching for an answer— “Hmm, Angel Tears and Demon Claw emerged at the same exact time,” Henrik noted quietly.

Mia jumped on the topic to escape Felix. “They did? I didn’t know that. Show me the page!”

“...Going off topic again? We won’t get anywhere with this report if we leave it to you two,” Felix interjected, miffed that his conversation with Mia had been cut short.

“This isn’t off topic. It’s an important point in history,” Henrik retorted, glancing at the clock. “Oh, it’s almost time for dinner.”

Felix’s mood took a 180 degree turn. “Food will sell out on us if we don’t hurry.”

Mia rushed to help him start cleaning up the table. Aside from a few decent items, the Royal Academy’s cafeteria served a lot of bizarre “food”, presumably to establish a nutritious balance for the kingdom’s future politicians, mages, and medical professionals. Losing the race for the few, scarce delicacies meant they’d be stuck plugging their noses while scooping cringe-worthy goop into their mouths.

“By the way, what do you want to do as the topic for the Grand Plan? I came along because I thought you guys were gonna discuss it,” Mathias mentioned, as he helped them clean the table. He silently read a magic book for the past hour instead of working on his report. He refuted any questions about his blank paper from the get-go, claiming that practical skill was everything to a mage, so prioritizing magic over all else was his duty.

Mia had been under the impression that their topic was already decided.

“What do you mean? Like I said before, it’ll be on Demon Claw.”

Henrik arranged his fountain pen inside his pen case when he joined the conversation. “About Demon Claw’s what? Pathology? Symptoms? History? You’re too broad. We get to start on our graduation research in our third year. Graduation might be a long ways off, but we only get four years of research. If you don’t narrow down the topic, we’ll graduate without getting any results.”



“No results in four years? Seriously?” Felix asked ignorantly.

Mia knew Henrik was right. In any case, this was no time to hold back. She declared her goal boldly, “I want to create a medicine for Demon Claw. But...if we make that our topic, it’ll fall too much under the pharmacology wheelhouse.”

“No, it won’t. I can handle the clinical study data in the Medical Department. The problem is...” Henrik turned his eyes to the law and mage students in their team.

Mia’s concerns revolved around them too. Creating medicine wouldn’t be of much benefit or interest to them. But Felix didn’t seem to mind.

“Well, I’m cool as long as I can turn in the Grand Plan and secure my credits. I’ll figure out a role for myself as we go along. We’re good as long as we turn it in by the Summer Solstice Celebration, yeah? We can make do with half a year.”

“Sadly, we have to turn in our proposal, including our topic, title, and outline by the Winter Solstice Celebration. Didn’t you hear?” Henrik straightened out the report papers on the table.

“We do? We have less than a month for that!” Felix gaped.

“Didn’t you do it last year?” Mia asked.

Felix gave a dry laugh. “Nope. I failed this class, actually.”

“...And that’s why you were held back a year,” Henrik concluded.

“We’ll pass as long as we submit something though, yeah?” He brimmed with confidence.

“What about you?” Mia asked Mathias.

In his own way, Mathias didn’t seem to care either. “Don’t make me keep repeatin’ myself. I’m a mage. Nothing matters as long as I train. Pretty sure nobody on the Mage Department’s faculty will even flip through the Graduation Thesis. I heard from an upperclassman that we’ll graduate just by writing a title and our name on a paper as long as we can do magic.”

“.....” Mia turned toward Henrik.

“I won’t settle for ‘passing’ or ‘good’ marks.” He shrugged.

Mia and Henrik appeared to be the only ones who needed to take this seriously.

SEVERAL days later: contrary to the magical decorations outside that brought life to the entire campus, Professor Rueger’s office was still a dreary mountain of books that threatened to crush any visitors to death. Mia was as frightened as ever, but she held her ground, giving Professor Rueger a hard stare. She clenched the papers he had shoved back into her hands.

“Please at least tell me what’s wrong with it. The other teams’ proposals have advice on them about where they went wrong, so why is ours the only one without anything written on it?”

“Your premise is bad to start. You can submit it all you want, but this won’t do.”

“So tell me why then.”

Would Professor Rueger ever say anything other than that her paper or ideas were bad? *Why must you be such a jerk?!* is what Mia wanted scream, but she bit her tongue and curled her toes inside her shoes instead.

Since they had formed a team, Mia and the boys gathered in the library’s study room every day after school, tossing around ideas and trying to narrow the possible topics down to just one. Or to be more accurate, only Mia was proactively coming up with topics. With no knowledge on physiology, Felix and Mathias simply watched the proceedings without contributing. Henrik was the sole person who gave opinions, but he only nitpicked, finding fault in her ideas despite never coming up with a concrete counter idea of his own. Hence, they had decided to just go ahead with Mia’s broad topic of “Demon Claw Medicine”.

But it was quickly rejected. “Not Worth Considering,” was all that was written in red on her proposal when Professor Rueger returned it. No other explanation for what was wrong with it. And so, Mia had come to his office to press him for a reason.

“You think you can create a cure for Demon Claw? Your topic is too broad and implausible. What you children can accomplish is severely limited. It’ll take you a year at best to even reach the research results of your predecessors. How are you going to accomplish anything in your remaining three years?”

Mia didn’t think he’d call even this topic too broad. “Getting out a single medicine should be possi—”

“Are you underestimating what goes into developing drugs?” He sharply cut her off. “Exactly how many of the drugs developed in Isea Royal Academy do you believe have been circulated outside these walls, into the world?”

“...Around a hundred or so?”

*This is **the** Royal Academy. The greatest research facility in the kingdom should’ve produced a considerable number of drugs.* Or so Mia had reasoned when she answered, but Professor Rueger sighed with impatience.

“Wrong. Only one. The miracle drug, as they like to call it, for Angel Tears.”

Seventy years had passed since the Pharmacology Department had been established at the Royal Academy.

Only one drug has been developed over seventy years? Mia’s jaw dropped.

Professor Rueger continued, “And just how much money do you think has been invested into research funds for drug development over all these years?”

Mia didn’t even have a number in mind for this one, so she kept her silence lest she be proven foolish twice.

“Twenty percent of the Academy’s operating expenses go toward it. So the guys on top despise the Pharmacology Department for being a money-eating low-return investment.”

“Twenty percent...?!”

Twenty percent of yearly operation costs, for seventy years. After tossing all that money at it, they had finally, only produced but a single medicine. Mia nearly fainted.

Professor Rueger smirked at her reaction. “But that’s reality. You get how it’s too big a topic for mere students, don’t you? You have neither time nor money.

You'd best give up and take the topic I give you instead."

His cocksure expression flipped Mia's rebellious switch. Her withering hopes popped right back up like a tulip after a storm.

That's right. If I give up here, it's all over for good.

"You've given me all the more reason not to give up! Please excuse me now!" Mia darted out of his office and returned to the dorm. Then she balled up the returned paper and chucked it in the trashcan before furiously running her pencil across a blank piece of paper.

Chapter 5: Snow and Chocolate

BEFORE they knew it, the proposal's upcoming deadline was only a week away. Yet, no matter how many times Mia rewrote the proposal, Professor Rueger still wouldn't accept it. Other students' attempts had passed on their first try, leaving Mia's team the outlier. Mia was starting to lose her patience over Professor Rueger's apparent discrimination.

Students in the same year hung out in the cafeteria, clearing their remaining homework assignments one after another, and were soon ecstatically preparing for the Winter Solstice Celebration. Most students returned home during the short winter break that commenced after the school celebration to attend the numerous parties being thrown. Rumors had spread that the law student Angelica planned a huge celebration at her house, to which she had invited many of her school friends. Naturally, a commoner—and beyond that, someone who had garnered her rancor for whatever reason—like Mia hadn't been invited.

"Hey, hey, didn't you invite him? How'd it go?"

"Yeah...guess what he said?!"

Mia turned in the direction of the familiar sultry voice and spotted Angelica with her many followers grouped around her. They glanced suspiciously at Mia, taking care to keep their voices to hushed whispers whenever they were saying what Mia was interested in hearing.

Is Felix going to go too? As the thought crossed her mind, tendrils of loneliness wound their way around her feet. Mia quickly downed the tasteless cafeteria soup nobody enjoyed and stood from her seat.

House parties had nothing to do with her. She already planned to spend Winter Solstice Celebration alone in her dorm, not that she even had free time to enjoy herself.

I...have to ace this proposal! Mia set the arduous goal of rewriting her proposal to mind to push away idle thoughts.

But things began to fall apart within her team due to the constant stream of proposal rejections.

MIA and the team were writing up yet another proposal in the library study room after school. The incessant downpour pelted the building with heavy raindrops, creating a loud steady beat that was only outdone by the whistle of steam pumping through the pipes. Barely anyone was in the library; now that their homework and tests were done, they had no reason to be.

“I wonder if it would work if we found new applications for drugs that already exist... That would shave off some of the process.” Till the bitter end, Mia refused to give up on developing a new medicine.

“Look, you get that it requires a tedious, comprehensive procedure now, right? Then we better find another way to cut out some of the process soon,” Henrik reminded her.

“But if we cut too much out, we’ll never get to create anything.”

“Didn’t Professor Rueger tell you that just because you want to try to do everything, it doesn’t mean you can? If you don’t compromise on something, you won’t be able to do anything. You good with that?” Her biggest proponent, Henrik, began to object to the medicine creation route.

“As things stand, this stuff is beyond me and I’m bored to death,” Mathias, who was usually silent, told them at their last get-together. That marked the end of his attendance to their far-too-boring meetings. He hadn’t come today either, excusing himself to independently train with new spells instead.

Felix was the only person who stuck with Mia, but the subject was outside his expertise, leaving him with little to do most days. It wouldn’t be unusual if he harbored his own complaints under his smiles.

Despite all that, Mia was stubborn and refused to budge. She couldn’t surrender.

There's no point in me attending this school if I don't make a cure. I have to do it. I have to make a medicine as soon as I can... Impatience and panic consumed her.

Ever since Professor Rueger described how difficult it was to develop a new drug, Mia became hopelessly frightened of even imagining the process. She was dragged into the abyss of despair anew; the proposal was all she thought of when she awoke and fell asleep. It had gotten so bad that she could no longer tell the difference between dreams and reality.

Mia couldn't deny how patient her team members had been with her. But in the end...not only was Felix a noble, his family was incredibly wealthy, enough so that they managed a massive plantation. And she had heard Henrik was the heir of a large medical clinic. Though nobody knew where Mathias was from or his background, his red eyes made it clear that he had a future as one of the treasured mages of Isea Kingdom. They were all elite in their own ways. Mia was the only one who didn't belong.

And that's why they'll never get it...not really. They're only tagging along because they need the credit... What they really want is to hurry up and finish this so they can enjoy their Winter Solstice Celebration. They might already... have plans. Angelica's sly grin haunted her memories, dredging up dark feelings that mockingly reared their ugly heads as they pulled her under. Mia desperately fought off the loneliness and jerked her head back up.

"All we have to do is get past Professor Rueger. I'll find a way to convince him, so please, just let me keep at it." Mia turned away as if to rebuff their opinions. She felt their frustrated sighs dig into her.

"Hmph. So, what? You just wanted us here so you have enough people to fill out a form?"

Mia slowly turned toward the pointed remark. Henrik stared at her, his face set in a grim scowl. Her breath caught at his distrust.

"Lay off her. Don't blame Mia like that. Don't you understand where she's coming from?" Felix immediately came to her defense.

Henrik ignored him, continuing to question her with narrowed eyes.

“No. You aren’t just a number,” Mia insisted, but her words fell flat. She couldn’t explain *how* they were more, when she gave them no say.

Henrik sensed her insincerity. “We aren’t? How is this any different from you doing everything alone? You *already* are.”

Mia couldn’t form an answer. The corner of his lips turned up in a cynical half-smile. Then he stood from his seat.

“Where are you going?” Felix demanded.

“Looks like I’m not needed. I hate wasting time. I’ve got a ton of medical homework piled up too. Can you call for me *once* you get your head out of the clouds and back to reality?” Henrik answered and turned to leave the study room.

Mia immediately stood to stop him. “Wait! What’re you going to do about your credits—”

“I can find someone who’ll write their name on a paper just like you.”

Mia chased after him, but Henrik upped his pace and disappeared into the Boys’ Dorm.

THE next day snow blanketed the campus. Mia slipped through the white world glistening under the sunlight, greeting the security guard before entering the herb garden. The warm air of the greenhouse wrapped around her chilled body. It was almost like spring existed here. Mia’s frozen body thawed in the heat. She wished the ice coating her heart would melt away too.

As soon as she’d enrolled in the Academy, Mia discovered the greenhouse herb garden situated in a corner at the northwest end of campus and learned it was a shortcut between her dorm and the library. Students usually passed through Central Hall to the back quad, but taking the greenhouse route was the shortest way to the library. There was just one caveat—the greenhouse and its route were limited to pharmacology students.

Tropical plants grew sporadically throughout the modern building made entirely of glass. Plants were situated around a massive brass smokestack.

These pipes were three times larger than those coiling around the classrooms, and the heat the furnaces generated and pumped through the smokestack and pipes was much greater due to its sheer size. White steam billowed from its top opening, fogging up the glass ceiling and walls.

Mia stopped to idly take in the vividly colored flowers growing up the walls.

These particular flowers were poisonous. Mia recalled during herbology Professor Einz had said that minute doses of this flower's venom could be used to cure delirium. The Academy cultivated herbs with known effects, refining them to heighten their medicinal efficacy. According to Professor Einz, that was the extent of their drug production capabilities. She had likened discovering medicine with new effects to finding a habitable planet among the billions of twinkling lights in the sky. It had been an oddly pointed comment that stuck with Mia. Perhaps she had been reprimanding Mia's ignorance in a nice way.

Mia sighed and dropped her gaze on the army of ants marching in a line across the ground. *I understand. I understood all along—it's not that easy to do.*

A day had passed since Henrik split from the team. At first, in her stubbornness, she tried to convince herself that they were better off without him, but now whenever she tried to fill out the proposal form she lacked the confidence to write anything. Each proposal she wrote turned out to be nothing more than her own wishful thinking. She learned just how critical Henrik's clearheaded objections were. Without him, the proposal would never be finished.

She wanted to apologize and ask him for help. Ask him if he would work alongside her again. But she knew in her current state he'd never rejoin. He'd told her to get her head out of clouds—to change her mind.

I have to change... I need to be flexible, find an appealing proposal he'd be up for.

Mia sat on the edge of the flowerbed where chamomile and sage grew, absently staring at the ants marching by her feet. Having cooled her head a little, she carefully went over what Henrik told her. Gradually, her obstinacy loosened, and his "compromise" began to take on a different meaning.

At her feet, the ants crawled along the ground—her eyes widened. The ants

took a detour around her feet and the hot pipes to bring food to their home.

That's it!

Sometimes, it's faster to walk around the wall instead of relentlessly charging at it. Nothing decreed she had to break through the front door. Mia was still a chick without the strength necessary to crack out of its egg, so she needed to take a different path that would get her where she wanted to go, even if it meant taking the long way.

All large exploits required a first baby step forward.

We need to take our first...step. She continued staring at the ground as she carefully mulled it over, her brow scrunched. The ants gradually made their way around until they finally reached their nest.

Nest...? Mia leapt up and bolted—an idea had struck! *You have to identify the disease before you can create a medicine for it. The first step in developing a medicine is pinpointing the nidus—the focus of the illness. Demon Claw is an incurable disease **we don't know the cause of!** I can make this the foothold that'll let me treat it at its source!*

Mia instantly narrowed her topic down to, “The Cause of Demon Claw and its Nidus”. Then she made a mad dash for Professor Rueger's office.

Mia burst into the office and rattled off her topic without taking a breath.

“You never learn, Mia Baumann,” Professor Rueger greeted her. But he gave her a genuine smile. “Your issue is that you misconstrue the role of medicine. Medicine isn't perfect. It can't cure the root of the problem. Medicines can only fulfill their role, which is to assist the body in regaining its balance, before things went crazy. The only thing that truly cures an illness is a person's self-recovery. Medicine only helps with that.

“Take cold medicine for example. It stimulates the body to sweat when it can't, effectively lowering a fever. When we take medicine for a runny nose, all it does is suppress the oversensitive mucous membranes. The great and mighty cure of Angel Tears only works to stabilize the patient's mental state enough to subdue the outbreak.

“So you say you want to identify Demon Claw's nidus, but how can a mere

student investigate it? You should well enough know that the infected have been quarantined and only doctors with special licenses can examine them. You should also be firmly aware of the strict laws preventing outside interaction with the patients. The Academy can't make criminals of its students. They'll do everything in their power to stop you."

"Then what the heck should I do?!" Mia yelled, "You won't even take me seriously when I say I want to develop a medicine, then you call my narrowed down idea to investigate the disease itself, impossible and foolhardy. Professor...do you want to stop me that badly?!"

Professor Rueger shook his head and sighed. "All I'm saying is to think it through more."

"I've thought more than enough about it!"

"Have you? If this is thinking for you, then you have no talent. Give up. I'm a busy man. Get out."

He was forcing her out of his office without answering, again.

"I'll come again! I'll make you acknowledge my paper this time for sure...!" she asserted with the last bit of fight in her.

"Good luck with that." He slammed the door in her face.

Mia bit the inside of her cheek. "What the heck is his problem? Seriously. Does he have some kinda bone to pick with me or what?!"

She felt like he was going to get in her way no matter what she did.

MIA raced across the back quad to the library like a fire had been lit inside her. She left her bag at her usual seat in the study room and promptly went to the bookshelves where the Pharmacology Department's documents were kept. After selecting several books on infectious diseases from the many rows, she settled in for the long haul back at her desk. The bindings of the unused books were still stiff, and the pages carried a musty scent like they were never aired. Students barely read these books because the contents creeped them out. Mia crinkled her nose as she scanned for passages on disease origins and

bookmarked them.

She reflected on what Professor Rueger had told her this time. *Is it possible to learn about the patients without interacting with them?*

Pinpointing the cause of the disease wouldn't be possible without interacting with it. Moreover, she hadn't a clue where to start looking. And even if she somehow got her hands on the strain of bacteria, she wouldn't have the means to contain it as a first-year student. She had hit a dead end right out the door. Mia sighed heavily.

I wish I was smarter.

Mia didn't think her grades were bad. But she believed getting good grades and being smart weren't necessarily the same thing. She tended to be bigheaded and narrow-minded, so she only saw what was immediately in front of her, not all the pieces at play, which sent her on wild-goose chases. As Mia contemplated her weaknesses, her eyes wandered to the empty seat across from her. The smartest person she knew was there—she blinked. Shaking her head erased the illusion. She couldn't rely on him until she had a definite topic to go forward with. Otherwise, they'd repeat the same argument. If she was going to rely on anyone—it'd be Felix and Mathias.

They had close to no knowledge on drug development, but ideas often come from the unlikeliest of places.

That's the answer! There's a reason why they say, "Out of the counsel of three comes King Leonard's wisdom."

Leonard was a past king of Isea Kingdom. He had invented a stone that confined magic. He'd been a luminary, he supported the kingdom in an era when mages had been decreasing in number and magic hadn't been easy to use, with his groundbreaking invention. Not only did all citizens learn of how Leonard's technology had saved Isea Kingdom from the neighboring Radius' invasion in history class, he was so great that his name and actions were also used in proverbs.

The saying meant that if you gather enough average people—though she felt bad calling the other two average too—you can gain a fraction of Leonard's genius.

Mia muttered, “Anyway...I’ll consult the boys,” and lifted her head.

“You’re working hard,” Professor Einz said, coming into the study room.

Barely any students had shown such zeal for their proposal within just a few months of attending the Academy like Mia and her team had, so Professor Einz paid extra careful attention to them. She brought snacks to the study room after school almost as often as the team met up. The kind, considerate, beautiful professor had earned herself the nickname, “Pharmacology Department’s Angel”.

“You’re still only interested in Demon Claw, I see. I can only say you have a penchant for pain.” Professor Einz peeked at the book under Mia’s hand and gave her an exasperated look. “You need to work hard to achieve new things, but don’t push yourself past your limits. You don’t want to pass out. Here, eat this later.” She slipped one of the chocolates she often snuck Mia into her pencil case.

Mia lit up. She was starved for sugar after using her head too much. “Thank you. I’ll do my best,” she promised, then went outside with the chocolate to take a break as eating and drinking weren’t allowed inside the library.

It was awfully dark outside considering that the sun should still be up, she thought, until she noticed the heavy snowfall. Holding her jacket collar against the wind, she placed the bite-sized chocolate in her mouth. It melted smoothly with her body heat, and its rich flavor and sweet smell permeated her mouth. Taking time to relax could enliven spirits, but the effect was lost fast on Mia; she grimaced.

Angelica was glowering at her, flanked by two of her flunkies. Ever since the confrontation where Felix had told them off, the bullying and isolation had come to a complete stop, but Angelica continued to treat Mia like air. This time, though, her eyes were fixed on Mia with more menace than ever before.

What’s her problem now? Mia suspected nothing good was going to come next.

“Aren’t you getting along just peachy with Lord Felix?” Angelica called out to her. “Sure, you curried favor with him, but aren’t you ashamed of using shallow tactics to make him pity you, with that sob story about your poor, sick

mommy?”

It wasn't the time to crack a wry smile, but hearing Felix called "Lord" didn't sound right at all. Mia's lips quivered as she tried to keep the corners from turning up. In the back of her mind, she noted Angelica was extremely easy to read. She honestly preferred Angelica to come at her straight like this, because she could counterattack.

"You've done nothing wrong. You should confidently stick up for yourself if you're not at fault for anything. They'll take advantage of it if you show any weakness," Doctor Letts had instructed Mia on many occasions after the village children's cruelty scarred her once again.

"That's what you think after being in that room, seeing and hearing what I had to say? Would you like me to introduce you to a good eye and ear doctor?" Mia replied, mock sympathy in her voice.

Red exploded on Angelica's cheeks. She hadn't expected a comeback.

Come at me then! Though what should I do if she does? Painting the cliché scene that she expected in her head, Mia trembled, readying herself for battle, and planted her feet. She wasn't confident in her physical strength. But Angelica didn't seem the type who'd want to get expelled from the Academy over a fight.

Mia blanched when she saw what one of the flunkies behind Angelica showed up with. The flunky held the notebook Mia had left in the library, along with the rejected proposal.

Angelica gestured for the flunky to hand her the proposal. "Felix said he can't come to my Winter Solstice party. All because he has to work on this proposal. Which means this thing is at fault." She ripped the discarded manuscript to shreds, smirking.

It was the most effective blow, and she knew it. Angelica let the wind sweep its remains from her fingers, then held her hand out for Mia's notebook.

"Stop it! Give it back!" Mia cried out, frantically clawing for her notebook.

Her notebook contained everything: their countless ideas, all that they had researched, her proposal's rough draft—everything she absolutely needed to

create the final draft was condensed into those pages. She could rewrite the proposal, but the notebook was filled with irreplaceable time; she'd never get her time back or those exact thoughts.

But Angelica wasn't going to listen. "You'll make my life difficult if this thing passes."

Angelica took the notebook from her flunky and smiled like an angel—she knew the notebook was the real deal. Her smile was like a delicate flower, but underneath was a predator baring its teeth at its prey.

"I want to join the same seminar as him. I want to work on the same research. But I don't want to research something as creepy and disgusting as Demon Claw. Yuck. I hope I don't get it by saying the name aloud."

The three flunkies lying in wait behind her stepped forward. A girl wearing a red tie was muttering something under her breath. Mia only realized it was an old magic spell once her notebook had grown wings and taken off into the sky.

Her notebook soared into the dreary sky above the back quad, then exploded with a bang. White fragments glided down onto the ground below, like misshapen snowflakes. They were nothing but ashes. Mia fell to her knees, the blood draining from her face.

Ashes rained down on her head, mixing with the white piles of snow.

Mia dug through the snow on all fours, searching for any large pieces amid the ashes. No traces were left. The notebook had been perfectly combusted; only the metal rings that had held the papers together remained in legible fragments.

"What are you doing over there?!" Professor Einz yelled, furiously dashing over to them. She must've heard the explosion. Her eyes narrowed to slits upon spotting Mia on her knees in the ashes, clenching the steaming notebook clips. "You lot...better tell me what happened. Come to my office this instant! Mia, you should come too. I'll make them apologize to you."

"I don't need their apologies," Mia said. "I have to...get back to work." She slipped by Professor Einz. Three days were left until the proposal deadline. It was time she urgently needed, not some halfhearted apology.

Covered in ashes, Mia stumbled into the dimly lit greenhouse. She didn't want anyone—especially not anyone who'd take Angelica's side—to see her crying.

Angelica may have been a noble, but the Academy claimed it treated all students equally. Was it really all right for them to let such violence off the hook? The tears she had held back burst through.

I hate this. I hate this. I hate THIS!

Kathunk! Kathunk!

Mia looked up through teary eyes as a large figure approached. The hiss of steam and the heavy thump of metal neared. She sniffled and moved to the side as the two-legged automaton marched by, steam spewing from its back with each lumbering step. It paid her only the briefest of glances after identifying her school uniform colors and then continued its patrol of the garden. The automated guards—known as Auto Guards—rarely came out during the day, but were quite numerous at night. She never saw automatons in her village, but since coming to the capital—and especially to the Academy—she saw them more often. Nobility employed Auto Guards alongside human guards to double down on security, but commoners still didn't feel comfortable being around them.

Mia sat in front of one of the flowerbeds and buried her face in her knees and sobbed. Only the Auto Guards heard her cry.

How long had she cried for? The bushes and trees rustled; Mia jumped to her feet. The sun had set already and the snow stopped. The moon loomed above the glass ceiling. She strained her eyes in the direction of the sound and glimpsed a shadowy figure in the moonlight. Her heart lurched. People rarely traversed the greenhouse when class wasn't in session; even the most serious of students didn't travel these parts after class. And Auto Guards made a lot more noise than a person.

Something was off. Mia squinted at the shadows.

Huh?

It was too dark to see their face. But only people from the Pharmacology

Department had access to the greenhouse, and the figure had closed the distance between them through the narrow trails, zigzagging through the greenery without second-guessing their step. Their familiarity with the place made her think they were an upperclassman. But something was strange. As if she were playing with a Spot the Difference Picture Book, Mia found her answer.

Oh, that's it. The color is wrong.

The second after the figure had stepped into the white moonlight, an electric shock sent the hair standing on Mia's body. Mia was frozen where she stood, the backs of her eyes dyed a deep-red.

Chapter 6: The Frozen Girl and the Red Tie

WORD of a student found frozen in the herb greenhouse spread through the Academy like wildfire that night. Felix had a bad hunch when he heard where it'd happened, since he knew how much Mia loved the greenhouse. He paled when his premonition turned out to be true.

"They're still bullying her?" Felix asked Mathias as they raced to the med room in Central Hall where Mia was taken.

"They've been pretty tame these days," Mathias answered, blocking his way into the room for some reason when he took a look inside first.

"Out of my way," Felix shouted at Mathias and shoved his way past him into the med room. His eyes rounded. Henrik, who'd ditched the team, had beaten him there. His nails dug into the book on his lap where he sat at her bedside, outrage flared in his verdure eyes as he stared down at the bedridden Mia.



Why's he here?! He beat me to it?! Again?! Mortified, Felix gritted his teeth.

"I believe this is the work of a mage student."

A Pharmacology Department's assistant professor—Professor Einz—had stayed by Mia's side the entire time. From what they had heard, she was the one who found Mia first. Standing beside her was a young, unreliable-looking professor.

As Felix wondered where he'd seen the professor before, Mathias whispered, "He's Professor Bahr, an assistant professor for the Mage Department."

"I found her collapsed on the ground when I went to the greenhouse to collect herbs for tomorrow's class experiment. Her body was ice-cold, like she had been frozen, so I called for one of the Auto Guards to carry her here, and then I went to get Professor Bahr to unfreeze her. I'm so glad I discovered her before morning. She would have been in grave danger otherwise... She could've frozen to death."

"I was shocked when Einz smacked me awake. Someone cast Freeze on the girl." Professor Bahr gave Mia a pitying look. His timid eyes were the same shade of dark-red as Mathias'.

"Freeze is a high-tier water spell," Mathias muttered. "I read somewhere in the textbooks that screwing up the temperature can freeze the heart and kill the person."

"Right you are. It's a deadly spell," Professor Bahr groaned. His expression twisted with displeasure. "Einz, you claim it's the work of one of our students. But mages, or should I say anyone other than those from the Pharmacology Department, are forbidden entry into the greenhouse."

"That's the mystery here... The security guard said no other students aside from Mia entered the greenhouse after school. And the Auto Guards weren't tampered with nor did they ring the alarms... Who else can use magic aside from your department?"

"But as far as I'm aware, none of our students can use high-tier water magic."

"You can't be sure they haven't been learning in secret. Textbooks disclosing

the secrets of high-tier magic are distributed to mage students their very first day at the Academy.” Professor Einz sullenly swept the red bangs off Mia’s forehead and placed an ice-chilled cloth upon it. Heartbreak colored her features.

Mia’s cheeks were bright-red; she had developed a fever after being frozen.

“Does she have a fever?” Felix asked.

“She’s in shock from the abrupt loss of heat. A fever is the body’s way of regaining warmth. Basically, she just has a cold. She’ll be fine. The real danger is if her temperature drops, because that would mean her system has stopped fighting off death.”

Felix relaxed, it was just a cold. *But who in the world did this? That woman? Angelica? Angelica Heidfeld?* The face of the girl—no, the woman—who’d threatened Mia while pursuing Felix instantly came to mind. She had invited him to her house for a Winter Solstice Celebration party, but he wanted to be with Mia, so he turned her down with their research proposal as the excuse. Had his poor choice of words caused this?

A while back, when Mia’s bag went missing, Angelica had undoubtedly been the mastermind behind it. There was no other explanation, for he found Mia’s bag discarded in the Law Department’s common room trashcan. Lacking the courage to tell Mia the truth because he was afraid it’d only hurt her, Felix lied and said it had been delivered to the lost and found.

The Heidfelds were a prestigious line of marquises who governed the prosperous trade of the southern borderlands of Bruckestadt. Enormous sums of money flowed into their local businesses, pooling wealth and assets into their deep pockets in exchange for their promise to guard the border were Isea ever to go to war again. Why would a noble family positioned so closely to the power and wealth of royalty waste their time trifling with the third son of barons, the Keyserlings, who only owned a simple plantation?

She hasn’t caught on, has she? Felix shuddered. His secret identity had been elaborately crafted since the very day he’d been born. He doubted someone could easily uncover his real identity when only the Academy president and Mathias knew of it.

...Either way... Felix reigned in his thoughts from the rabbit hole they were about to follow. *If she was involved in freezing Mia, I won't forgive her no matter where her family sits on the noble food chain.* Felix set his jaw grimly, cold determination flickering in his eyes. Just then—

“Crud,” Henrik muttered, an equally grim expression on his face.

Felix prepared himself for the worst.

“The proposal is due by this weekend.”

Felix was relieved he was just worrying about the proposal again. “We can just do it without Mia.”

“And how do you suggest we do that? The team leader is from the Pharmacology Department, so if she doesn't write the proposal I highly doubt we can get it through the wall known as Professor Rueger.”

Professor Rueger at some point had earned the reputation for acting as the greatest obstacle for getting a Grand Plan Proposal approved. Almost every student in the Pharmacology Department had given up and relegated their graduation research to whatever topic their seminar professor chose. Throughout the history of the Royal Academy, only a select few students had ever had their proposal topics approved. In summary, Professor Rueger was an impenetrable wall, and no first-year students stood a chance of breaking through him.

Henrik's grievances were well-founded. What could Felix say when all he had done was show up for their meetings? Without even a basic understanding of medical and pharmaceutical studies, he'd left the decision making up to Henrik and Mia. He was in no position to complain.

“We have the same class again next year. Maybe we should give up on it this time.”

“I won't accept just ‘passing’ or ‘good’ marks,” Henrik grumbled.

“We can't give up,” Mia said hoarsely. Her eyes snapped open as if she'd been listening all along.

Felix clung to her bedside. “Mia?! Are you all right?!”

“This is nothing.”

“Do you remember who did this to you? You were hit by a spell, right?”

“A mage’s...red...tie? I think I saw one, but...it doesn’t matter.”

“How can it not...?”

“Searching for the culprit will waste our...time. We have to...turn in our proposal,” Mia strained. She looked as if she was at the end of her rope. She sat up in bed, but her eyes couldn’t focus.

Those vacant eyes, which seemed to register nothing else, flooded Felix with horrible memories. Chills crawled along his spine.

“Sleep. You won’t get better if you don’t.” He grabbed her shoulders to stop her from getting out of bed. Mia shook off his hands and stood regardless.

“I can’t. I’m betting everything...on this topic. Mom and I...this is all we’ve got. I’m...going to the library. I was in the middle of...research.” Mia stumbled away from the bed and staggered to the med room doorway. Dizziness got the better of her, sending her to her knees on the ground.

Fragments of nightmarish memories invaded Felix’s mind.

“You okay, Chris?”

“Mm-hm. Just a little dizzy is all.”

If only I had realized it at the time. Hot, tormented feelings rising from the pit of his stomach, Felix reached for her—and lifted Mia off the ground.

Mia eyed him in sheer surprise. Felix was just as astonished himself. She was light. She was so light he wondered where she was storing all her passion, which burned hotter than the sun.

“Let go...of me,” she weakly resisted.

With childlike frustration he countered, “Not happening. You sleep, Mia. We’re first years. Even if this year doesn’t work out we always have next year.”

“We don’t. I don’t. Everything will be for nothing if it’s not done now. If we don’t make it this time, it’ll never happen.”

Felix faltered at the urgency in her eyes. He understood that she wanted to cure her mother’s illness as soon as possible, but even in the off chance that she managed to turn her proposal in on time, it’d take at least five to six years for results, if there were any at all. Moreover, even if this year was a bust, as long as they made it next year, it’d be in time for their graduation research. Mia had no reason to push herself in her current state. Just how sad did she intend to make her mother by ruining her own health?

Yet every second mattered to Mia. But whatever the case, Felix simply couldn’t let the weakened girl in his arms resume rewriting the proposal when she looked far past her limit.

“I’ll take care of the rest,” the words were out of his mouth before he knew it.

“What’re you saying? You...don’t know a thing about medicine...do you?”

“I don’t. But it’s not like we’re going to get started on the research now. We won’t even be writing the thesis yet. We just need to submit a proposal that’ll shut Rueger up. The three of us can do something about that—no, we *will* do something about it. You get some sleep, Mia. I’ll stand watch over you,” Felix whispered convincingly close to her face, his bangs nearly brushing her skin. There was no room for objection.

Overwhelmed, she gaped up at him and said nothing more. Felix proceeded out of the clinic and to the main road, a happy hop in his step as he carried Mia tightly against his chest to one of the many seated benches. Positioning Mia on the stone-like chair he drew the straps over her legs and scoot in next to her, a slight blush rose to his cheeks being so close, but she barely paid him any attention. Strapping himself in, he called out to the coachman in his booth off to the side.

“Girls’ Dorm please!”

The man nodded and began pulling levers that Felix couldn’t see, “Right away, sir!” With a heavy lurch, a shriek of steam, and grinding gears the stone chair rose out of the ground on three legs and began marching off following the metal rail underneath it to their destination.

The tripod transport increased in speed and waddled its way down the road passing other tripod automatons filled with students and teachers. Felix checked on the now-behaving Mia as they made their way to the Girls' Dorm to make sure she was handling the ride okay. In her feverish state she absently watched the world blur by.

THE two professors left next, leaving Mathias alone in the med room with Henrik to rack his brains over what to do next.

"...How's Lord Felix gonna do it?" Mathias groaned. *Crap*, he snapped to his senses and looked sharply at Henrik.

He was supposed to refer to Felix without a title, but he'd gone on to unnaturally say, "Lord". In the years since he'd last seen his younger childhood friend, Felix had become someone he could no longer act familiar with. No, that wasn't it, what had changed was Mathias' perception of him. Ever since they had met again, Mathias had been struggling with how to interact with Felix; his desire to act friendly, as he had in the past, and his duty to acknowledge and accord respect to Felix's rank fought for supremacy inside. As a result, his behavior was erratic and unnatural.

"Yeah, guys aren't allowed into the Girls' Dorm, right? How does he plan to keep watch over her?" Henrik brought up, equally exasperated as he was irritated.

Mathias initially relaxed, realizing that his slipup hadn't been caught on to, but then was disgusted by how peripheral Henrik's misgivings were. *The Girls' Dorm?! That's the least of our worries! Lord Felix can't be held back another year! I'll be in for it if he is!*

Things were dire now that the three of them would have to come up with a proposal topic without Mia. Sure, its submission would earn passing marks automatically, but that leniency only applied to students *without* problems. There was no choice but to err on the side of caution; a problem student like Felix would likely have to earn the best grades possible before he could move on to the next school year. In comparison to that, infiltrating the Girls' Dorm was a trivial matter. Mathias was positive that Felix would even go as far as

dressing up like a girl in order to stay with Mia.

He has a tendency to run wild.

Or was it better to say he lost control of his feelings? Felix tended to act like a child in their Terrible Twos phase at times. While that was an issue, restraining him too much had resulted in the incident at the entrance ceremony, so Mathias couldn't afford to be too strict either. He was walking on pins and needles, constantly wondering if he'd get sacked—or lose his head for good. He'd been forced to take this position because they were childhood friends, but Mathias felt the whole thing was more disadvantageous to his career than anything else.

Most of all, it's suffocating! This horrible uniform is!

He had to live his schooldays hunched down and huddled up to keep the blasted uniform from ripping or popping along its seams. Every once in a while, he accidentally stretched and sent a button flying off. Luckily, military training taught a man how to sew his buttons back on. Unluckily, he usually couldn't find the buttons after they took flight. As someone who loved to be active, limiting his movements didn't mesh well with him. Not to mention, mage classes were full of sitting at a desk, memorizing spells motionlessly.

I'll get rusty at this rate, he mentally lamented as he groaned aloud.

“Hey, there's something I want to ask you,” Henrik interrupted. He looked up at Mathias with an intensity in his verdure eyes.

Mathias had questions of his own.

Why did you come back?

But he had a fairly good idea of the answer. Though Mia brought loads of trouble, Mathias found himself unable to abandon her. She was like someone who was swimming alone against a raging current and it was impossible to stop himself from holding his hand out to save her. Henrik likely felt the same way. From the start, whether Henrik was aware of it or not—his expression was extremely difficult to read—he'd paid just as much attention to Mia as Felix. Felix was going to go crazy now that Henrik was back. It was as clear as day that the friction between them was going to get worse.

Henrik was necessary for creating the proposal, but when it came to love—if it could even be called that at this point—he was nothing more than a hindrance. How was Felix planning to handle him?

Mathias rubbed his temples. He had a headache from the inevitable stench of a fast-approaching quarrel.

Henrik stopped waiting for Mathias to agree and began rattling off his questions instead. “What happened to Felix in the past—or more importantly, last year? He looks like your typical idiot, but when you actually talk to him, he’s not. And his panic attacks haven’t kicked in again since the entrance ceremony. He seems healthy to me, so what’s his deal?”

Internally panicking, Mathias laughed him off. “Why ask me? I wasn’t around last year either. How should I know?”

“Because you look like you know. At first I thought you guys must’ve just hit it off right from when you started attending the Academy, but that’s not quite it. Felix seems to trust you. The way he dragged you into the team was unnatural too.”

That’s the top of the first-year class for you. He’s smart. Observant. Mathias fought the urge to click his tongue and quickly rambled, “You think so? I happened to sit near him in my first class and we’ve been hanging out since. Gotta problem with that? Does becoming close friends need a reason?”

An expression of mock amazement crossed Henrik’s face. “When people who are generally quiet are *unusually* talkative, it *usually* means they’re trying to hide something.”

Outdone, Mathias felt his face twitch. Henrik was right. He’d run his mouth off because he’d been so desperate to deflect Henrik’s inconvenient questions. Cornered, cold sweat dripped down his back. A part of him wanted to just confess everything, but he didn’t trust Henrik enough to tell him about his duty. It wasn’t something to be lightly spoken of. There was a high chance doing so could put Felix in danger.

Mathias intentionally kept quiet as he gathered his thoughts. He sipped on the tea the doctor had poured for them.

“Did you hear that His Highness, the prince, is currently attending this Academy?”

Mathias gagged on his tea—the burning hot liquid seared his throat, but he endured the pain while attempting to school his features to hide his surprise.

“Where’d that come from?”

“It hasn’t been made public, but it’s tradition for the royal family to attend the Royal Academy’s Law Department. They keep their identity a secret to avoid subjecting the Academy to chaos, and well, likely to protect both their life and chastity.”

“Yeah, maybe, but goin’ by the prince’s age, he should’ve enrolled last year. If he’s here, he’d be with the second-years.” More cold sweat trickled down his neck, pooling at his lower back.

“Normally that would be the case, wouldn’t it? ...You know, I was thinking it’s rare for them to let a student repeat a year. With the Royal Academy’s policy, only the best of the best are let in, so failing a year should equal expulsion. You’d *think* there’d have to be a special reason that they couldn’t just expel Felix. And you can be sure that’s why a certain noble young lady has been going on a frenzied rampage to secure his affections, no?” Henrik grinned, his penetrating gaze probing for further clues.

His know-it-all face infuriated Mathias. Was he looking forward to watching how Mathias would talk his way out of this one? He racked his brain for the answer, and decided the best option was to share a sliver of the truth Henrik was after.

“It’s not what you think... Felix’s friend died last year. He was....” *His childhood friend who adored Felix and followed him to the Academy*, Mathias nearly said, but went with, “...a mage who became infected with Angel Tears.”

Mathias gazed out the window. A tall belfry stood in the middle of the quad. Its large bronze bells signaled the beginning and end of classes exactly as its gears dictated. Auto Guards now stood in front of it around the clock, but they hadn’t always.

“...He jumped from the belfry right in front of Felix. He’s been traumatized

ever since, and it aggravated the panic attacks he'd been dealing with since he was a kid. He couldn't even go outside for a period of time. He looks all fine and dandy now, but the attacks come whenever his emotions go outta control... At least, that's what he says."

Chris wasn't a stranger to Mathias. If only Mathias had followed what society had wanted of him and entered the Mage Department in his stead. Such an atrocity would've never happened if he hadn't whined about not wanting to be a mage and just sucked it up. Not a day had gone by where he wasn't filled with regret.

He'd tried to make it sound like his knowledge was secondhand, but he couldn't help feeling like he'd sorely failed in that attempt. But Henrik's smirk vanished.

"Angel Tears, you say? ...Is that why he had that panic attack during the entrance ceremony?"

"He's always saying, 'Every time, I feel like I'm gonna die for real,' but there's no medicine for overbreathing—until now," Mathias hinted at a cure completely unrelated to overbreathing. Quick-witted, Henrik immediately understood.

"Ah...so that's why he's so attached to her? I get it: she's his wonder drug," Henrik grumbled unhappily.

Things are gonna get more annoying if he's really not aware of how he feels, Mathias concluded, narrowing his eyes on Henrik.

"And there you have it... You'd better not snitch that I told you."

Henrik nodded uncomfortably and quit pursuing the topic. His eyes dropped to the ripped proposal the doctors said Mia had been holding when they'd found her. A giant red X was struck through it. Several proposals sat on Henrik's lap that had been rejected one after another.

Henrik finally spoke again, "You know, a lot of steps go into the process of developing a new drug or medicine. I was convinced the proposal would never go through as long as we intended to accomplish every step."

"Then why didn't you force her to give up?"

“She wouldn’t have accepted it...even if we fought her on it. Mia’s determined to create a new medicine for our graduation research, no matter the cost. I find it interesting, but it’s reckless by all accounts.”

“...How much do you think we can accomplish?”

Henrik was the type who seemed like he might be able to accomplish more than Mia once he got passionate about it. He obviously possessed enough talent and competence for it. Unexpectedly, Mathias was also curious about Henrik’s take.

“If it were me, I’d make *this* alone our topic. I’d put everything into *this*. Because if we don’t know *this*, we can’t do anything. On the other hand, as long as we figure *this* out, we’ll eventually get our desired result.”

Perplexed over what “*this*” was, Mathias glanced at the open book on Henrik’s lap. He raised a questioning eyebrow.

“This is the book Mia was reading,” Henrik answered, showing him the cover. The title of the book next to the Academy’s library sticker read, *The History of Infectious Diseases*. Henrik flipped to the bookmarked page and pointed at a paragraph.

“If this is what Mia’s motivated to work on, I’m up for it. I came back to the team for that reason.”

Amid the plethora of unknown words, Henrik pointed to one that Mathias understood. But he couldn’t figure out how that’d become their topic.

“That’s it?”

Henrik nodded. He underlined a single word: Causation.

Chapter 7: Potions and Letters from Mom

FELIX arrived at the dorm with Mia fading in and out of consciousness in his arms. Passing through the dorm gates, he came to a fork in the road: the right led to the Boys' Dorm, and the left to the Girls'. He avoided the foul-smelling building to the right, taking the path to the left.

Auto Guards posted outside the Girls' Dorm turned their heads toward him with a loud klink. Their eyes lit up as they scanned him and Mia. After a dreadful moment of anticipation where he half-expected them to detain him for even approaching the Girls' Dorm, they moved aside. Felix took the chance to slip inside before they changed their minds—if they had minds.

Not a soul was in sight inside the dorm. Most of the students had already returned home for winter break after submitting their assignments. The dorm mother plodded over to Felix. "Okay, Mr. Wolf, that's far enough for you!"

"Please allow me to carry her to her room!" Felix insisted, but she stole Mia from his clutches and maintained that men weren't allowed inside. "But I can't let a frail lady strain herself carrying—"

"I don't need your chivalry." She rolled up her sleeves, then flexed her bulging muscles in front of him, shooting him a single glance to prove she had no need for a man's help. It effectively ended any chance Felix had to get past her. And here he thought the Auto Guards were going to be his biggest obstacle. Who knew human women made better security?

Leveled by her wicked glare, Felix temporarily withdrew to his dorm. After stopping by his room to grab a potion, he promptly circled back to the Girls' Dorm.

He could've just left Mia under the dorm mother's care, but nobody at the dorm would really look out for her. Felix doubted that the dorm mother had enough spare time to watch over Mia all day. And from what he'd observed, Mia hadn't made any close female friends who would care for her. On the other

hand, he could think of plenty of girls who'd take this chance to worsen her condition.

Besides, it's obvious she'll push herself if I leave her alone.

Felix loitered, pacing in front of the Girls' Dorm for a time, until he suddenly spotted a healthy large tree out front. He started climbing, careful to keep out of sight.

MIA'S eyes snapped open at the mysterious sound of a pile of snow thudding onto the ground. Her eyes were met with Felix's as he worriedly peered down at her. Startled, she tried to sit up, but—

"Sick people need to stay in bed." He lightly pushed back her forehead with his finger and eased her back.

Uh? Huh? Where—

She had no recollection of anything that had happened. Mia moved only her eyes, taking in her surroundings. Piecing things together through her feverish haze, she grasped the situation.

The ceiling was embellished with a crest that depicted the moon devouring the sun; faded red wallpaper covered the walls; an antiquated, yet structurally sound, wooden window frame came into view. Pale, cream-colored linen curtains hung over the window's frosted glass. Students were free to decorate their dorm rooms however they liked, but Mia lacked the budget to do much, so she used the room as it was. There wasn't much she could use to confirm whether it was her room or not.

Mia rolled onto her side and reached her hand out to feel along the top of the side table for the letters from her mom. She felt her fingers run across stiff, crinkled papers. Relief swept through her.

It appeared that she'd been carried to her room after she lost consciousness. Her sudden sleepiness might've been due to the fever medicine she'd taken in the med room.

How did Felix get inside the Girls' Dorm then? Students were granted access

to the dorms on the Royal Academy's campus provided that they could prove their identity. But the opposite sex wasn't ever supposed to be allowed inside the corresponding dorm. Mia was extremely curious how he had pulled it off.

She scrambled for words, "I-I'll be fine on my own now, so can you please leave? This is the Girls' Dorm. We'll get in trouble if they find you."

Mia couldn't relax alone with a boy. Though she chalked Felix's affections for her up to imprinting on a caretaker, like how a baby duckling imprints on the first being they see when they hatch, his exterior appearance was that of a seventeen-year-old boy. And it didn't help that he fell under the category of terribly attractive, wonderful boys.

D-Dorm mother! DO! YOUR! JOB! She wanted to scream, but Mia wouldn't get off scot-free either if it were discovered that she'd brought a boy into the Girls' Dorm. Expulsion wouldn't be out of the question. She wanted to avoid getting expelled at all costs, so she swallowed her panic.

"I won't leave. I mean, Mia, I know you'll keep working the moment I take my eyes off you," Felix replied. A pen scratched across paper where he sat at her desk. Mia snuck a peek at what appeared to be his attempt at writing up a proposal, but the contents regretfully deviated from what she wanted.

"Please...I...don't have time for this. Can't you turn a blind eye to it?" she pleaded.

Felix stopped writing and turned his sorrowful gaze on her. "You know, I... want to support your dreams, Mia. But I won't let you out of bed right now. Rely on me. You try to take everything onto yourself too much." He left the chair to crouch down in front of her, staring intently into her eyes.

She expected to be yelled at, but the kindness in his gaze melted away the tension in her heart.

"Talk to me. Why are you so desperate, Mia? You're still just a first-year—as am I—and a child. Leave the difficult stuff to the adults and take on what you can actually handle. This kingdom is full of talented researchers. This disease is classified as incurable, so they haven't developed a medicine for it yet, but they're researching it. How could they not, when it's such a dreadful disease that everybody's living in fear of?"

Felix was trying to reassure her, but Mia gave her head a weak shake.

Admittedly, Felix's thought process fell in line with what the rest of society believed. Isea's people were convinced a cure would eventually be discovered for every disease that needed one. But they were deluding themselves. She knew those expectations would melt away and leave a horrible aftertaste, like bitter hard candy.

"...They won't develop a medicine for it." Her words fell from her lips like raindrops on asphalt. As soon as she had said it, the theories she hadn't wanted to believe rung truer than ever.

Felix furrowed his brow. "They won't?"

Paying no mind to his disbelief, Mia continued to speak with her hoarse and throaty voice, "Demon Claw's outbreak occurred around the same time as Angel Tears'. Remember? That's what we read for our report. But a long time has passed since a medicine was developed for Angel Tears. I find it strange they haven't done anything to help Demon Claw in the same amount of time. I've waited, patiently working at an associated clinic inside the Sanatorium's First Wall for ten years since my mom was quarantined inside the Second Wall, you know?

"I've waited more than enough. Shouldn't they have figured something out by now? But while the medicine for Angel Tears steadily improved over time, they haven't come up with even a single remedy for Demon Claw. Heck, they don't even have a theory for it. And it's worse than that—I've only learned this since I enrolled here, but—in the entire history of the Academy, Demon Claw hasn't been used as a research topic even once. Doesn't that mean they have no intention of doing anything about it?"

"That's..." Felix sounded like he wanted to say more but couldn't come up with a good argument.

"If this goes on, Mom will live out the rest of her life in the Sanatorium, until she dies. Professor Rueger said it takes an insane amount of money and time to develop a new medicine, remember? That's when the pieces came together. The number of people infected with Angel Tears is about the same as the number of people infected with Demon Claw. But the thing about the people

infected with Demon Claw is that they're all dispensable commoners. While those suffering from Angel Tears are the kingdom's treasured mages."

"Mia," Felix interrupted, implying she shouldn't say more—but she wouldn't stop.

"That's why there's no hope if I—if someone directly affected doesn't do it."

Felix picked Mia's hand up off the bed and held it to his chest. "But...either way, you still have next year!"

"I don't. It won't work if I don't do it this year. The research stipend only comes once every two years. Research is out of the question if we don't get funding this year."

Professor Rueger's advice rang true to her—Mia only had this year to do it.

She thought she made sure to smile, but Felix's arms wrapped around her as he whispered, "Don't cry." He buried his cheek in her hair and gently, ever so gently, stroked her head with his large hand. Her heart squeezed. She remembered how her mom used to do the same thing to her, so many years ago.

Ba-dump. Ba-dump. She heard Felix's heart beating; it unraveled her own highly strung heart. Mia let herself be swept up in his comfortable embrace, beginning to relax, when—

"I...will definitely make this happen. We'll absolutely make a medicine."

How's he going to do that? Mia lifted her head, questioning. Her heart skipped a beat at the sincerity shining through his strong gaze.

"So please, I'm begging you, don't be reckless. If anything were to happen to you, I'd..." He glanced at the side table. A bottle of fever medicine sat on the wooden table. She figured it was the same medicine she drank in the med room. But Felix pried his eyes from the bottle and pulled a tiny vial out of his pocket instead. "Drink this. You'll get better as soon as you do."

Streaks of light-purple tinted the liquid. In all her years working at the clinic, Mia had never seen a medicine quite like this. She opened it and got a whiff of a sweet scent. But it smelled artificial with sweetness meant to mask its

bitterness. Whatever it was, she wasn't going to drink some suspicious potion the clinic had never used.

"My family doctor gave this to me. It's really effective."

"What's it called? I won't drink something I don't know. I'm scared to find out how it'll react with the fever medicine."

Felix avoided looking directly at her. "It won't react with the fever medicine. I just don't know the name of it. But...you can trust me."

"And what exactly are you saying I should base my trust on? You, a law student, have brought me a mysterious potion not even a national clinic kept on hand, and you want me to drink it when you don't even know the ingredients. Would you drink it if you were in my shoes?"

"I'd drink anything you gave me, Mia," Felix proudly proclaimed.

Mia instantly felt foolish for asking him. "Fine, I'll drink if you drink it first and nothing happens. Oh, don't forget to down the fever medicine with it too."

"You don't trust me?"

"I think you're a little naïve to think you could earn my trust with that explanation."

Felix was clearly irritated. He quietly grumbled, "You're sure argumentative for a girl, Mia."

"You lack logic for a boy, Felix!"

His remark triggered her inferiority complex. *It sounds like he's complaining that I'm not cute because I'm thickheaded! I already know that without him having to tell me!* Furious, she was about to give him a piece of her mind, when he beat her to it.

"Come on...just drink it. I'll make you if I have to."

She recoiled from Felix's sudden intensity. Harshness lit his usually peaceful eyes. He seemed to be looking through her at someone else so intently that she couldn't shake the feeling that someone was really behind her. She turned to look over her shoulder.

“I can’t let someone important to me die again. You think I’d stand for that?”

Mia watched him take a sip of the potion. What he was about to do next struck her like a lightning bolt. Even if she were embarrassed by having the wrong idea later, preparing for the worst was infinitely better than stupidly walking right into an irreversible trap.

Hey now! You can’t do this no matter how desperate you are!

SLAP! Mia instinctively shoved her palms and the letters she was holding against Felix’s face, stopping him midaction.

Sorry, Mom! Please help me protect my chastity! Praying, she increased the pressure she pressed the letters against his face with.



“.....”

Felix quietly kissed the letters for a long moment before pulling away from Mia in ultimate dejection. He unsteadily sank onto his knees next to her bed. The letters softly peeled off his lips and fluttered to the floor, revealing tears in his eyes.

He reflexively swallowed the medicine in his mouth and moaned, “...Crap...”

Relieved that she’d safely escaped the imminent danger, Mia faced Felix sharply and pointed at the floor, as if demanding he sit like a dog. He picked up on her signal right away and sat formally on his knees, looking like a puppy in for a scolding.

“*Felix Keyserling*, you’d better listen to me,” she demanded in the quietest tone possible, contrary to the level of desperate panic she felt inside. “First, unless someone is in an unnaturally weakened state, you can’t die from a cold. Second, colds are contagious through touch. Finally, orally giving medicine—especially between men and women—is not something to be done lightly.”

Her teacher-like tone was a bluff. She needed to show him she was in charge here, because she couldn’t treat him like she did before. It was as if the cute little puppy that’d been following her around had suddenly transformed into the big bad wolf. She didn’t know how she was supposed to react if he’d pulled that on her out of romantic feelings.

Wait, does that make sense? When I really think about it, it shouldn’t be done between two men or women either! Gaaaah! Phrases like infection through contact and oral exchange sound so graphic! Iccccck! Mia felt like she was going to explode from shame over what she had said.

But her flustered state was lost on Felix, who absently muttered, “Contagious...through touch?” His head drooped, and he stopped breathing.

He was acting strange. Concerned, Mia followed the direction he was looking, and realized the letters from her mom that she had pushed into his face were sitting on his lap.

“These letters...say they’re from Zara Baumann? Are they from your mom?”

Mia nodded and reached out to retrieve her letters from him. Grateful to her mom for saving her from a crisis, she carefully smoothed out the pages.

“Are you well? Not pestering Doctor Letts with selfish requests, are you?”

The letters always started with those two sentences, and never mentioned anything about the confined world her mother lived in. Mia wanted to know how her mom was doing, but her letters only ever asked about Mia—even though Mia’s reply would never reach her.

“Mia, I’m always thinking about you,” the irreplaceable, precious letters always concluded.

“Yeah, they’re my good luck charm.”

“They are? But how...?” Felix put his hand to his mouth, baffled.

She didn’t follow what he was trying to say. But on the other end, Felix screwed up his face like he couldn’t understand why she hadn’t picked up on it.

“All things considered, these look relatively new... When did you get them?”

“Mom sent a letter every month without fail since she was quarantined, but that’s the last of them. Doctor Letts—that’s the doctor who oversaw Lemmilt Clinic—secretly acted as the go-between, but I haven’t received any letters since he passed away. So they’re from a little over six months ago.”

Alone once and for all, after she had been deprived of the mother who’d given birth to her and lost the doctor who’d taken her in and raised her, Mia came to the Royal Academy.

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“What doesn’t?”

“Listen, isn’t Demon Claw so infectious that you can catch it from the slightest contact? You can catch it just by touching something someone infected has

touched. That's why the infected are quarantined in the Sanatorium. Why would a doctor from a clinic affiliated with the Sanatorium go out of their way to do something that would spread the disease?"

Words from Doctor Letts that had faded into the recesses of Mia's memories abruptly came back at Felix's question. Every time after Doctor Letts had covertly passed Mia the letters, he told her, "These letters are *safe*. When you get older, I want you to carefully think about why they are safe."

She always thought it was because he had sterilized them. But thinking it through, how could he have sterilized paper? The letters wouldn't have kept their shape if he had sterilized them with alcohol or boiled them. The more she thought over it, the more she realized it could mean something else.

The letters from Mom are safe...?

Mia tried putting her hypothesis into words, "Is it possible...you *can't* get infected through touch?"

She could hear the years of indoctrination shattering and crumbling within her.

"I don't know. It's dangerous to jump to conclusions. But...I think there's plenty of reason to look into it. Quarantining people doesn't make sense if it's not that infectious." Normally carefree Felix looked like a completely different person when he was serious. He walked over to the window grimly, frowning.

"I'll go discuss it with Mathias and Henrik. Drink this and sleep, Mia. You must," he said, placing the half-full vial on the side table. "I'll come back later once we've got the proposal together." He stepped onto the windowsill.

"Huh? Henrik came back to the team?! ...Wait, you're coming back? Hold on! This is the second-story! Are you crazy?!"

Felix ignored Mia's barrage of questions and nimbly jumped out her window.

OH MY GOSH! He's going to die! Mia leapt from her bed and ran to the window, where she fearfully peeked through her fingers at the ground below. A figure was running down the road in front of the dorms, towards the school buildings.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me! Seriously, what is *with* him?!” Mia groaned, dragging herself back to bed and sunk into the mattress.

Too much had happened all at once. Her mind was overloaded and couldn’t process the information. Instead, her body reacted first, recalling the soft touch of full lips through paper and the passion-filled eyes of a wolf.

I don’t care how attached he is to me, do people really go that far? Don’t tell me...he’s not just attached to me? Mia felt the blood rush to her cheeks.

“...Seriously, what is with him?”

He’d disappeared before she had gotten a chance to rail at him for nearly stealing her first kiss. She repeated her complaints to herself, trying to instill them with her anger, but her voice lacked its former intensity.

Chapter 8: To the Closed-stack Archives

AFTER mulling over what she should do with the potion Felix (unintentionally) tested for poison, she drank it. Mia thought it would be childish not to make use of it after everything he'd said and done for her, and she was willing to try anything to improve her health. The potion had a curious taste that was both sweet and bitter, but it was highly effective: Mia's fever was cured by the next day. It was a miraculous recovery. She was beyond thrilled but hated that she was stuck blushing every time she looked at the vial and inevitably thought of Felix.

Blah. I feel like I won't be able to look him in the face normally. How should I act when we meet up?

Despite promising her that he'd return once they had taken care of the proposal, Felix didn't come that following morning. Mia felt awkward heading to their usual study room, but those feelings instantly went out the window upon arrival.

"Oh, Mia..."

The three boys must've pulled an all-nighter. They were haggard, bent over the proposal like they hadn't realized dawn had broken yet. Felix's exhaustion gave way for pure excitement when he saw Mia.

"Did your fever go down?"

"Y-Yeah. Your medicine really works."

"Right?"

"Medicine?" Henrik questioned.

"Yup. It's the one I got from my attending physician," Felix answered.

"Ah...one so expensive it hasn't circulated to the masses yet," Henrik concluded with a knowing look, fitting the pieces together in Mia's head as well.

Plenty of highly effective medicines existed, but they were so rare that they weren't stocked at every medical clinic, or even circulated. Rather, they were only distributed to clinics of major cities or otherwise made available to a select few, mainly nobles who could afford them.

I wonder how much it cost... No. Don't think about it. But what should I do if he asks me to pay him back? Mia averted her eyes from Felix and looked at the report left on top of the table instead. She couldn't believe her eyes.

In her absence, the boys had come up with a topic.

"Is Demon Claw Actually Contagious?"

Mia sighed in awe at the concise question. The topic was specific, moreover, of great interest. Demon Claw's Causation had sounded cool, but nothing else had clicked with it and it lacked a feasible method to research, but she saw the route they could take to investigate this topic. It had a clear end goal in sight.

"Wow, guys! I think this is it!" She wholeheartedly exclaimed, and swiftly added an outline for their topic's inquiry to the paper.

She just barely managed to submit their proposal the day before the Winter Solstice Celebration. Astoundingly, it was approved by the impenetrable wall known as Professor Rueger.

"You finally narrowed it down to something actually worth doing. You've got a very concise and intriguing topic here. I'm interested in it too. I look forward to seeing the Grand Plan," Professor Rueger acknowledged, so kindly that Mia thought she was still feverish.

Among the four possible grades of Perfect, Good, Passing, and Fail, the best of them, Perfect, was stamped on the right-hand corner of their proposal. With this achievement, their team had cleared the primary workload for the first semester and secured their class credits.

"At long last, we've taken the first step..." Mia felt spontaneously moved to tears as she reported their grade to her group.

Felix rushed towards her, flustered. "Like I said before...um...don't cry in front of others," he said, roughly wiping her cheeks with his handkerchief.

“Hey! Sto—ow! Why are you so rough?”

His panic was replaced with a serious air. “You shouldn’t show people what you look like when you cry.”

“Is that something you say to a girl?!” Mia snapped. “Sure, I get it’s not the prettiest face, but still!” Her eyebrows twitched upwards.

Felix returned to panicking. “No, no, I didn’t mean it like that. Um, er, uh...I just don’t want...you know?” he mumbled under his breath.

“We don’t have time to play around, you two,” Henrik interrupted, sounding considerably annoyed. Felix sullenly pursed his lips and fell silent.

Mathias smiled wryly and patted Felix on the shoulder as he asked Henrik, “What’s the next step?”

“We have to finish everything off by April. We don’t have time. I don’t think we can make it unless we split up the workload.”

As soon as the Winter Solstice Celebrations ended, they would be in the new year—January.

Mia didn’t see why they had to rush. “Why? We’ll have three months? Didn’t they say it was due before the Summer Solstice Celebration?”

“They did, but if we’re going out of our way to submit it anyway, shouldn’t we aim for this too?” Henrik pulled out the Graduation Research Guidance Packet. “If we do, we don’t have time for winter break.” He flipped through the packet until he landed on the page he wanted to show her.

Mia’s eyes rounded on the sentence: “Another application must be filed to receive research funds. Apply with the designated application form by May.”

“What? We have to submit another form for this? By May?!”

She’d planned to apply for the research funds, but the procedure had completely escaped her. Color drained from her face. She had wholly believed it would be fine if she submitted the Grand Plan in time. How wrong she had been.

Henrik groaned. “You really tend to overlook the vital things. That was a close call. There’s a competition for acquiring research funds. The best topic out of

the proposals submitted wins. Topics will be judged differently from how they were graded in class. To make things worse, upperclassmen who want more funds can enter too, so we don't stand a chance unless we go all out with this."

"We don't automatically receive research funds for a perfect score...?" Mia's excitement from having their proposal pass with flying colors fell. Their team was really, only now, standing at the start line.

"Our only basis for calling its contagiousness into question is your mother's letters, right, Mia? How else do you plan to approach this?" Henrik asked.

She mulled it over—the greatest problem at hand was their lack of information.

"If possible, I'd like to hear from the patients and doctors working at affiliated clinics. It's too bad that there's no way for normal people to get inside the Sanatorium. If only Doctor Letts were alive..." Mia murmured the last part.

Curiosity shimmered in Henrik's eyes. "Oh yeah, I'm surprised you were hired for work at an affiliated clinic inside the Sanatorium, considering how stringent the laws are. You were an assistant, right? Aren't even assistants subjected to strict review?"

Mia turned her eyes to the ceiling. Generally, the Sanatorium clinics were always short-staffed due to the widespread fear of infection. Furthermore, Mia had been let in because the official assistant had barely touched their work—or more like they almost never showed up for work—leaving the position more or less vacant. Doctor Letts' assistant had been fired the same exact day Mia had been kicked out, but the assistant had been so incompetent that it was a valid decision.

"Y-Yeah... Instead of saying I was hired, it's more like Doctor Letts personally let me stay there with him. Things might've been more lenient because we were literally in the middle of nowhere with nothing but the Sanatorium around."

Henrik didn't look convinced. He quietly contemplated, "...I wonder why your Doctor Letts did something so dangerous as give you those letters. It bothers me."

“Because I was pitiful?”

“I doubt that’s all there was to it. Think about it: he’d lose his job if he was found out. It’d destroy his life.”

“You know, I always thought that he disinfected the letters. But disinfecting paper is no easy task. Paper melts if it’s put in boiling water, while alcohol would cause the ink to run. That’s why clinical records weren’t allowed inside the Sanatorium’s Quarantine Ward. Doctor Letts had to write down his patient notes outside—”

Henrik’s head snapped up in the middle of Mia’s explanation. “...That’s it! Interacting with the patients might be impossible, but if we could at least get a hold of their medical records—”

Felix had kept quiet during their technical discussion, but now he leapt out of his chair as if he’d been hit by the hot steam puffing out of some of the nearby pipes. “...If I remember correct, the law stipulates that medical charts of designated diseases should be managed by the kingdom. A selection of those charts are stored at the Royal Academy, among other research materials! Here! In this very library!”

“Are you positive?” Mia’s chair skidded backwards as she pushed herself up, smacking her hands on the table with a loud, dull thud in her excitement.

“I answered that question wrong on my law test last year, so I’m positive. I never make the same mistake twice—couldn’t stand failing on the make-up tests too,” Felix proudly boasted.

“That was an extremely specific test question. And this ain’t something you should take pride in, bro,” Mathias snorted, rolling his eyes. But Felix sped out of the study room, a wide grin on his face. Mia watched him go in disbelief. Was he that delighted to do something useful?

“What will you do, Mia?” Henrik asked.

“I’ll check out the charts with Felix and see if that’s an option for now.”

Mia had planned to run after him, but was momentarily stopped by a nagging thought. If the charts were stored at the Academy instead of the Sanatorium, it could only mean they were no longer needed. In other words, they were likely

medical records of patients who had died from Demon Claw. Instantly, her mind went to her mother, and to the inevitable future waiting for her. Her heart lurched.

“Can we leave the charts to you then?” Henrik’s voice pulled her back.

“You can,” she answered, using sheer willpower to keep her voice firm.

As if I’d pass up on any possible clue!

“Then I’ll do my own thing,” Henrik decided. “Mathias, I need you to help me out with something. It’s only the beginning of a theory, but there’s something that’s been bothering me.”

“Yeah? Fine, but...why me?” Mathias shot him a questioning look.

“It’s easy to forget, but you are a mage. I want you to lend me a hand looking into the relationship between magic and Angel Tears.”

“Angel Tears? What’s that have to do with Demon Claw?” Mia asked, finding his request strange.

“I don’t think it has anything to do with it. But the first outbreak occurred after the Bruckstadt Conflict at almost the same time as Demon Claw. Something about that has always bothered me. So I want to thoroughly investigate everything that occurred around that time.”

“You want to take a historical approach with it?”

“Something like that.”

Mia wasn’t convinced, but at least this would give Mathias a role too, after they’d managed to come up with one for Felix. She wondered how their mishmash team would cope at first, but now she was impressed by their unexpected harmony. It sent hope bubbling up inside her.

Had Mia tackled this on her own, she would’ve despaired over the enormous amount of work lying ahead of her. But she had teammates and friends. Her eyes grew misty from the deep, heartfelt gratitude she felt.

“That’s one terrible face you’ve got there. Better hide it before Felix comes flying to your side,” Henrik pointed out with a dry laugh.

THE librarian said that the records were held in the closed-stack archives, so Mia and Felix went to visit Professor Rueger's office. Professors of each department managed the keys to their department's closed-stack archives, and students weren't allowed access without their explicit permission. Assuming the medical records would be under the Medical Department's jurisdiction, Mia made sure to double-check with the librarian, who informed her that the Pharmacology Department professors could grant access to its key as well, as the records involved drugs. Considering their history together, Mia thought Professor Rueger would be the easiest to ask for help.

Unfortunately, they had bad timing; Professor Rueger was out of his office. Not willing to give up, Mia headed for the prep room next door, since Assistant Professor Einz was usually there.

Professor Einz was indeed present as they had hoped, so they explained their situation and asked for the key to the archives, but she gave them a troubled look.

"I would love to help, but the rules just won't let me," she refused reluctantly.

"I understand. Would you mind letting Professor Rueger know we would like to borrow the keys when he's back?"

"Sure. I'll let him know... You really are passionate about this. You should relax for the Winter Solstice Celebrations tomorrow. Aren't you going home for winter break?"

Mia had no home to return to. The lodging she'd rented for the six months after she'd been kicked out of the clinic was already rented out to another person.

"I'll be staying in the dorm," Mia answered.

Professor Einz's face clouded as she recalled Mia's circumstances. She apologetically changed the topic. "Oh, you might want to know that we still haven't found the culprit."

Mia fished through her sea of thoughts for what Professor Einz was talking about. "The culprit who froze you," Professor Einz supplied. "We would be able

to do a better job investigating if you remembered anything else.”

Mia shook her head. She had tried to remember since it’d happened, but the only vivid memory she had from directly before she was frozen was the color red. She couldn’t remember the face or even the gender of the person who had frozen her.

According to the *supposed* mage student Mathias, when a human is frozen, their memories freeze with them, causing irreversible damage.

“Is it a similar concept to how after an egg has been hardboiled, it can never regain its former soft state?” Henrik asked before, and had earned a hard nod from Mathias. Once memories froze, their structure was permanently altered so they couldn’t be fixed, just like a hardboiled egg.

They’d probably catch the culprit if she could just remember. But Mia thought it was a waste of their precious time to hunt down the person who had frozen her. She couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d fall right into the culprit’s trap if their Grand Plan was ruined by chasing after them.

The culprit who got in our way, huh?

“Just so you know,” Professor Einz mentioned, breaking Mia’s train of thought just as the appearance of a certain girl had crossed her mind. Professor Einz lowered her eyes, hesitating over whether to continue. “I spoke with *those* girls, but they insist they knew nothing about it. They were probably trying to scare you into stopping your research on Demon Claw. I plan to give them a stern warning, but I’m worried about what they might do next.”

Mia nodded and glanced at Felix. To be accurate, they were trying to scare her away from hanging around him.

“You’ll make my life difficult if this thing passes.”

She’d never give herself away, but the culprit was most likely the girl who had said that to Mia. If she wanted to disrupt their research from proceeding, then Mia could never give her the pleasure by letting her succeed. Mia wouldn’t stand to watch her dreams crushed for such a ridiculous reason. It wasn’t like she *wasn’t* frustrated to just take that girl’s crap without getting even. But if there was more to lose from getting even, then it was more important to

refrain from getting emotional about it.

And standing beside Mia was Felix—the boy her enemy was obsessed with. She stole another peek at him from under her long eyelashes. She'd grown accustomed to his appearance, but his face was still handsome, and his eyes were as beautiful as staring into a crystal-clear lake. Who could blame the girls for fussing over him?

As if I'd give him to you, Mia thought, and was startled to find possessiveness taking root in her. *Uh, I mean because he's my precious teammate!*

As she was busy making excuses to herself, Felix smoothly announced, "I will protect Mia no matter what happens. You don't have to worry about us."

For a full second, Mia thought his bold declaration had stopped her heart. Thinking he had to be kidding, she looked up at him, wide-eyed, and met a serious gaze locked on her. Somehow, the air around him suggested it wasn't the time for jokes. But she didn't know how to deal with him when someone else was watching.

Professor Einz tossed her hands up in surrender, mildly dismissing him. "Okay, okay. I get it. Do your best then." She turned to Mia and whispered, "You've got him wrapped under your finger, don't you?"

THEIR impatience getting the better of them, Mia and Felix borrowed the archive key from a Medical Department professor, then made their way down the darkened halls. Relying on the tiny flame of an oil lamp with a series of mirrors that moved with a wheel on top to brighten or dim the light, they fished through the medical charts in the pitch-black dust filled closed-stack archives.

Tomorrow being the first day of the Winter Solstice wasn't just marking a day on the calendar—it was freezing and dark out. If she'd been alone, Mia would've been easily discouraged, but having a friend with her was enough support to keep her going.

Yeah, he's a...dear...friend. Contrary to her thoughts, Mia struggled to relax—she couldn't forget his powerful gaze.

"I will protect Mia."

*Did he say it like that because he cares about me as a friend? Or—*Mia wondered, watching Felix hard at work. He suddenly lifted his face and their eyes locked.

“What’s wrong, Mia? Tired?”

The color of his eyes seemed to constantly shift. In the daylight, they reminded her of ripples spreading across a shimmering lake surface. Now she felt like she was looking into the deep, dark-blue depths of the ocean. She fought off losing herself to their depths by hastily averting her eyes and avoiding the question.

“N-No. I-I’m fine. Oh yeah, that reminds me, aren’t you going home for winter break, Felix?”

Felix wasn’t the only one who had a home to return to for the holidays. Henrik also said he planned to go back over the break. And Mathias hadn’t said one thing or another about it. She felt guilty for infringing on their holidays by recklessly involving them in the pursuit of her dreams.

“Mm...it’s more fun for me to spend time with you here than it is for me to go home?”

Mia jerked her head back to him in surprise and found him smiling dolefully at her.

For all the time they spent together, she still couldn’t get used to his comments. She darted her eyes around the room, buying time for a response, when he continued, “Anyways, Henrik is right. We don’t have much time.” His smile regained its trademark radiance, and he tapped the medical records.

Relieved he’d gone on to change the topic, Mia stared at the mountain of records. They had about a hundred charts on patients, from the time they had showed signs of infection until their deaths. The records were neatly filed, but the sheer bulk of each case folder, on top of their age, unfamiliar terminology, and bad handwriting, added to the difficulty of the task.

“Do any of the symptoms stand out to you, Mia?”

“Hm, they’re all things I know of at this point.”

Demon Claw's initial symptoms were headaches, minor fevers, stomachaches, along with almost every symptom related to poor health in general. None of the symptoms were life-threatening at first, so they were often overlooked, but the end of every case came from something as simple as a common cold, which would then mutate into a lethal illness. Though individuals who visited the clinics for a common cold were also examined as a precaution, a kingdom-wide examination of every citizen was conducted each year, and all diagnosed with the disease were forcibly detained and institutionalized in the Sanatorium.

"Professor Letts often told me as a child that while we may mourn for those who are quarantined within the Sanatorium, a more positive way to look at things is that they're lucky to have their illness discovered early so that they can keep on living."

Skepticism furrowed Felix's brow. "Doctor Letts sounds like he's full of contradictions... On one hand, he tried to pry you away from the patients, on the other, he secretly handed you letters from your infected mother. It doesn't make sense."

Felix had been stuck on that point since he'd found out about the letters. He normally never showed interest in anything, so Mia found his obsession with this detail surprising.

"I think it's probably because I was throwing a fit."

Mia often broke down crying after her mom was quarantined. Willing to do whatever it took to see her mom again, she constantly snuck off to visit the Sanatorium, where she would be yelled at and turned away. Doctor Letts' suggestion for Mia to work at a Sanatorium's affiliated clinic existing within the First Wall came after she'd worn him down with her persistence. Even if she couldn't see her mom again, she'd cope better if there was only a single massive wall between them instead of a whole building, he'd reasoned.

"Do what you can for your mother at the closest place possible," he had directed, granting her the words she'd needed to finally dry her tears and move forward.

She smiled bitterly at her past. Felix still wasn't convinced. "The charts say nothing about infection or becoming infected."

“Yeah. But they only write the patient’s condition and symptoms on the medical charts. Patients are quarantined right after they’ve become infected after all... I don’t think it’s conclusive enough,” Mia replied as she continued deciphering the charts. Her eyes narrowed in on a blacked-out box to the right of a patient’s name.

“Hey, what do you think this is? It’s not a symbol, is it?”

Whoever had blacked out the section went through the meticulous effort of making it look like a simple symbol or pattern.

“Beside the name? The address is under the name, so it’s not a part of that, is it?”

Mia thought through all the data that was supposed to be included in medical charts and listed them aloud. “Address? Medical history? Family structure?”

“Shouldn’t it be something less complex than that? It’s right beside their name.”

“Ah!” Mia quietly exclaimed, upon seeing the patient’s gender written directly underneath the blacked-out box. “Their age?”

“Could be their date of birth,” Felix uttered at the same time.

They exchanged looks.

“Is there any way we can read this?”

Her curiosity was piqued even more by the fact that someone had gone out of their way to hide it. She flipped the file over and held it up to the oil lamp, rotating the dial to adjust the mirror and brighten the light into a blinding beam, but they had diligently made sure to black out the same spot on the reverse side as well. Mia concluded it was unreadable without conducting a special analysis.

“Hmm...” A contemplative look crossed Felix’s face. “Guess I could try asking for a favor.”

“Oh? Do you have connections with someone who can help?”

He let out a gasp and rushed to cover himself. “Just figured I might find somebody who can help if I ask my relatives.”

“Aah, makes sense because you’re a nobleman...” Mia assented.

“It’s not what you think,” Felix said uncomfortably.

Mia hadn’t meant to come off as snippy, but maybe he’d heard it that way? Confused, she tilted her head, then suddenly remembered a vital issue.

“Oh no, we can’t get someone else’s help! Records can’t be removed from the closed-stack archives!”

“Right...I forgot.”

“I guess we’ve got no choice but to look into one person at a time. This isn’t going to be fun...”

They’d have to take the time to investigate over a hundred former Demon Claw patients. Worse yet, their patients had passed away already, and Mia felt heavyhearted about having to talk to the bereaved families. Uneasiness loomed over her; she imagined the same future for her and her mom. Would she make it in time? Debilitating anxiety swirled inside her. But—

“You want to go and talk to each patient’s family? Hold on, doesn’t that basically mean...” Felix clapped his hands together out of the blue. Mia jerked her head up at the sound. He was grinning away like an idiot. “Th-Then why don’t we leave campus tomorrow as a part of our investigation?” he nervously suggested.

DURING school breaks, students were allowed to leave the Royal Academy if they received permission. As a last-minute idea on her way to submit her Notification of Leaving Campus slip, Mia dropped by the study room where Henrik and Mathias had bunkered down for their research to invite them along, but they had mixed reactions after hearing what she had to say.

She assumed it was because they were wary of any contact, indirect or not, with patients.

“Listen...can’t you do me a favor and go alone with Felix?” Mathias asked with a discomfited look. He tugged at his tie, loosening its hold on his neck.

“Why? He’s who suggested we go out and investigate. And we’re in over our

head trying to look into all the patients... We'd be a lot better off if we all went together... Did you have other plans?"

They had entered the Winter Solstice Celebration, so it wouldn't be unusual for them to have other plans. Mia had no right to interfere with that.

"Sorry," she said thinly.

"No, I don't. It's not that," Mathias mumbled, not making any sense. After winning the battle with his tie, he started fiddling with a dangerously taut button next.

Henrik smirked beside him. "Wow, Mathias, you've become so passionate about devoting yourself to research now. It sounds like it'll be a lot of fun to me, so I think I'll join you."

"Thank you! I'm sure Felix will be thrilled too!" Mia exclaimed, relieved to have his help.

Mathias forced a laugh. "Oh, man... I'm really startin' to pity him now."

Chapter 9: Day of the Winter Solstice Celebration

THE next day, Felix waited for Mia decked out in his formal frock coat under the fir trees, which were decorated all the more fantastically to celebrate Winter Solstice. Today marked the first day they would see each other dressed in clothing aside from their uniforms. The top hat he wore stood as a symbol of high-society men. Felix, the son of a baron—Mia remembered his status as a young nobleman and found herself captivated by him as she headed over. Realizing her own attire wasn't suited for standing beside him, she stopped dead in her tracks in the snow.

Mia was wearing an ordinary, knee-length black dress and leather lace-up boots. She had tossed on a wool shawl to combat the cold, but even that was a dull-gray. Her outfit screamed commoner. Even though she had wanted to dress up, she barely owned any clothes aside from her uniform, so she'd settled for braiding a piece of her hair, which normally hung down her back, and tied it with a ribbon.

But, contrary to her expectations, when Felix caught sight of her, his entire face lit up with a smile, as if he only saw *her*, and not the dreary clothes she wore. He ran over to her. For some reason, he held a single-stem flower, which didn't bloom this time of year. With white petals circling a cone-shaped yellow center, Mia instantly recognized it as a chamomile flower. Where had he obtained it?

"Mia!" Felix called excitedly.

But his smile faded to a grimace upon spotting Henrik and Mathias, in their bowler hats and lounge suits, directly behind her. Felix put his hand over his eyes and staggered forward, then leaned pathetically against the fir tree beside him.



“Why did they tag along...?”

“Eh? Um? Is it bad that they did?” Mia was astounded by how disappointed he looked. Mathias came over and put an understanding hand on his shoulder.

“I came along because Mia asked for my help. Don’t you think you’ve bitten off more than you can chew, attempting to visit the families of over a hundred people by yourselves?” Henrik feigned indifference, only adding to Felix’s ire. “Besides, I wanted to talk with you guys. There are some things I want to check related to what we’ve been researching.”

“What you’ve been researching? You mean about Angel Tears?” Mia asked.

Henrik nodded and brushed the snow off his hat. “The time of the outbreak is oddly skewed. Look here. Two years before the Bruckstadt Conflict....” As he spoke, he flipped open his notebook, and Mia leaned over to take a look when Felix stepped in front of her.

Felix placed the chamomile in her hair. The smell of apple wafted from it, a scent meant to calm the heart. But her heart was hammering out of her chest, because his finger had brushed along her cheek.

“I know she can be used to cure, but she’s also simply charming, soothing, and cute—this flower, I mean. I thought you two were a match made in heaven, so I went to the greenhouse to ask for a stalk.” He wrapped his arm around Mia’s shoulders and turned her in the opposite direction of Henrik. “We have an appointment to make, so let’s get going.”

“Oh? Did you make plans with someone?” she asked to calm herself and fanned her blushing cheeks despite the fact the air was already cold.

He nodded. “I set up a meeting with one of the bereaved families just outside the city. We’ll have to walk a ways from the train station. Will you be all right?” He glanced down at her light shawl to her boots. Her dress didn’t look too warm compared to the heavy attire the boys wore.

“I’ll be fine,” she said, still reeling in surprise over how fast and easily Felix had scheduled meetings. Not even twenty-four hours had passed since they’d made plans to investigate the patients’ families. To begin with, she couldn’t even figure out how he had gone about looking up each address, never mind

getting in contact with them.

“I just made use of a simple connection I have,” he replied nonchalantly to Mia’s questioning stare, and shrugged like it was no big deal.

Oh yeah, he said something about having connections yesterday. Is it because he’s a noble? Mia wondered and let it pass.

But beside her, a disgruntled Henrik muttered, “Hmm. A simple connection, you say?”

“I’ll leave you behind,” Felix announced, hurrying off while Mia was trying to puzzle through what Henrik meant. She carefully touched the flower he’d tucked into the hair resting above her ear.

Charming, soothing, cute... It’d almost sounded like he had been saying that about her. Though Mia shook her head to rid herself of conceited thoughts, she became aware that her prior inferiority complex over the way they were dressed had disappeared. A faint smile touched her lips as she ran after him.

THEY rode the steam train halfway, the expensive private homes they saw through the frosted window appearing more infrequently the closer they came to the outskirts of the city. Skyscraping residences made of stacked bricks gradually lost their height, built outward instead, over larger plots of land. Gaps between properties grew wider as the sooty sky regained its natural color. At the end of the train tracks, they arrived at Heinitz, a rural area with only a Sanatorium surrounded by forest and plantations. This was the closest Sanatorium to the capital.

Depression set in on Mia as she walked the paths weaving between the snowy fields. *It’s the same everywhere—people don’t want to get close to the Sanatoriums*, she sighed, painfully remembering the one her mom was confined in.

Horried by the prospect of infection, citizens frequently staged protests in opposition to building plans for Sanatoriums. In response, restrictions were placed on construction locations. Protesters nearly won in getting limitations placed on the building of Sanatoriums being relegated to areas where no

human could survive.

Although the mass majority claimed that quarantining the infected in Sanatoriums in the middle of nowhere, like this, was more than humane, Mia honestly wasn't convinced. Desolate and abandoned, the surroundings reminded her of a battlefield after a war was fought; one that the residents forgot to come back to. The only activity came from the bipedal and trilegged automatons patrolling the area without rest. They aimlessly wandered without purpose when no one wanted to be near the Sanatoriums.

"Where are we meeting?" Mia asked.

"Over here." Felix beckoned them to the lone building towering over the endless snow-buried fields.

At the Sanatorium? It can't be.

No other building aside from the Sanatorium stood before them, but Felix trudged forward anyway. They arrived at the massive round walls, guarded by complex layers of Auto Guards armed with massive halberds. They looked intimidating, like ancient gargoyles puffing out smoke. Even while buried in snow they were quite dangerous.

A snow covered window was pushed open, "Has someone among your ranks come down with a sudden illness?" a burly guard prompted from the humid guard box, steam wafting out from within. Felix shook his head. "Normal citizens aren't allowed inside." His penetrating gaze probed them for why they had dared to venture where few did.

Mia had heard those same exact phrases enough times to blister her ears during all her visits to the local Sanatorium as a child. Although a Sanatorium's attached clinic had exceptions when they would accept uninfected patients, they refused to examine those afraid that they might be infected with Demon Claw. Aside from times of dire emergency, they sent everyone away without question.

The inside of a Sanatorium was cordoned off by two walls: the First Wall and the Second Wall. Only emergency patients and medical personnel were allowed inside the First Wall, and only head physicians were granted entry past the thick Second Wall. Auto Guards were positioned inside and outside of the facility to

enforce the rules and limit the number of human security staff as few wanted to risk infection for work. Though Mia had become an assistant within the First Wall, not even she had been able to go beyond the imposing concrete walls sectioning off the Quarantine Ward beyond the Second Wall.

Mia sent a confused look at Mathias and Henrik following close behind her. They both shrugged and shook their heads, signaling that they were just as in the dark about this as she was.

“Patient family members aren’t allowed inside either?” Felix asked, unruffled. He peered inside the gates past the guard box to add to his act. The guard shook his head. “Then who gets to see them?”

Baffled by why he’d ask the obvious, Mia watched on as the guard inevitably grunted, “Only the doctors,” and gruffly drove him away as he slammed the window shut. Felix nodded like he had caught onto something, then began walking around the sprawling Sanatorium walls for some time before trudging into the forest beyond it.

They followed him into the dark forest depths until they came upon a shadowy figure standing alone amid the snowcapped trees. It appeared that this was who they had come to meet.

Mia was still baffled. “What was the point of doing all that other stuff then?”

“Insurance for later,” Felix said evasively. “Are you Hermann?” he addressed the figure who left the shadows and approached them. Light filtering through the leaves above illuminated an elderly man.

The man reacted to the name and startled. “My sincerest apologies for requesting that we convene here. Prejudice towards anyone related to the infected is awful, so I do not wish for anyone to know that I am related to someone who has passed from it...”

Guilt washed over Mia. Why was he acting so humble when they were the ones imposing on him by asking him to talk about the deceased?

Felix, on the other hand, was unashamed and unreserved. He nodded slightly to the man and promptly cut to the chase, “We have some things we’d like to ask about your daughter.”

He seemed accustomed to using people to achieve his goals, and that left Mia with a real taste of just how fundamentally disparate the worlds they lived in were. She was hit by intense loneliness; it felt like he had stepped out of her reach. It was unlikely that anyone else in their team could understand her feelings.

“He’s special,” Henrik grumbled, as if he had read her thoughts from the moment she’d begun to wallow in sadness.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think? Either way, don’t waste valuable time overthinking things.”

“Yeah.” He was right. Mia concentrated on the conversation before them instead of Felix.

“Then your daughter was born in Leo 312?” Felix clarified. Hermann solemnly nodded.

What? Leo 312?

Mia immediately latched onto that year. “Oh, she might be the same age as my mom then,” she thought aloud.

The boys were startled. Alarmed, Henrik questioned Hermann, “Do you remember anything else unique about your daughter? Anything trivial about her skillset, hobbies, or appearances will do.” Then he turned to Mia and repeated, “You too, Mia. Do you remember anything unique to your mom? Anything unusual about her skills or hobbies?”

“Umm...” Mia faltered at the demanding questions suddenly turned to her. She couldn’t remember her mom’s skills or hobbies. But as she searched the faces of her friends, Mathias’ eyes unexpectedly triggered a memory. “I think Mom’s eyes had a hint of red in them.”

Mia had brown eyes. But in her memories her mom’s brown eyes were tinted slightly with red, and she remembered thinking how they were beautiful like the setting sun.

“If I’m not wrong, red eyes are a trait unique to people with strong magic...”

Felix shifted his gaze to Mathias' red eyes.

"I was forced into the Mage Department when I didn't wanna join because of these accursed eyes," Mathias groaned in response.

Mathias' eyes are redder than blood. They say you can tell a powerful mage by how intense and vivid the coloring of the eyes are, so it's no wonder they wanted to turn him into one. Mia smiled empathetically for her friend. Then she abruptly recalled one of the stories about her past that her mom had written of in her letters.

"Speaking of which, they forced Mom to take the entrance exam for the Royal Academy's Mage Department because of her eyes, but she ended up failing the test..." Doctor Letts had informed her mom of Mia's desire to study at the Royal Academy. When Mia's mom had heard, she fiercely encouraged her daughter, insisting that Mia could pass, and then confided in her about her own failed attempt.

Hermann broke his thoughtful silence, his memory sparked by Mia's comment. "My daughter also had to take the Royal Academy's entrance exam but failed!"

Goose bumps prickled along Mia's arm at the bizarre coincidences. Both women were the same age, had been forced to take the Royal Academy's mage entrance exam, and had failed.

Mia stifled the trembling coursing up her legs. "What color were your daughter's eyes?!"

"Her eyes were an average brown, but we had heard mages with brown eyes exist as well. So she gave the test a try, thinking there was nothing to lose... She believed a rich future would open up for her if she enrolled in the Academy. She didn't want us to live out the rest of our lives as poor farmers..." Hermann confessed, shame coloring his voice and cheeks.

"In summary, your daughter took the test to enter the Mage Department," Henrik confirmed. Hermann nodded mournfully. "The common threads between the two women are that they were both born in Leo 312 and they both took the Royal Academy's mage entrance exam in Leo 328. They applied for the Mage Department, failed the exam, and developed Demon Claw

afterwards.” The color leached from Henrik’s face as he matter-of-factly read off his notes.

Brooding, he suddenly turned on his heel and walked towards the forest exit. Baffled, frowns creased Felix and Mathias’ brows as they quickly handed Hermann remuneration for his assistance and turned to chase after Henrik, who was heading down the road they had taken from the station.

THEY caught up to Henrik when he stopped in front of an old, worn-down, snow-covered bench left in the middle of the fields. He hung his head low, clenching his fists so tightly that they were whiter than the snow all around them.

Mia quietly called out to him, “Henrik? What’s wrong? Those certainly were strange coincidences, but we can’t prove that they were anything else by talking to just one person.”

Henrik furiously shook his head. “The facts are too consistent to be a coincidence.”

“Consistent?” Felix chimed in. Mathias caught up last and joined the circle around Henrik.

“I told you guys I was looking into Angel Tears, right?”

A horrible premonition slithered up Mia’s legs like a python wrapping around its prey. Were the goose bumps creeping across her skin merely from the frigid air? She rubbed her arms, hugging herself. “Yeah, I do.”

“Leo 328...an extremely noteworthy event happened that year, so it’s seared into my mind. It’s the year the very first outbreak of Angel Tears happened—and in a newly enrolled student at that,” his voice came out a whisper against the howling winds as if they were trying to silence him.

“Huh...?” Mia couldn’t do anything but stare at Henrik.

“No cases had occurred even within the military, but it suddenly developed in a new student at the Royal Academy... I want to believe it’s unrelated. I was hoping to find evidence to repudiate my theory by researching Angel Tears, but

somehow...I only found support for it instead,” he explained, agitated. He crushed the notepad in his hand.

“What’s your theory?” Felix wanted to know.

“...You know about King Leonard?”

“Yeah. He invented Neu-Aera.”

“Are you well-informed about Neu-Aera technology?”

Mia nodded. Felix affirmed, “I’ve got the gist of it.”

They all turned a doubtful eye on Mathias.

Offended, he puffed out his chest and declared, “I might’ve been forced into it, but I’m still a mage, I know this stuff. It’s a required topic in the Modern Mage History class. Heck, I even wrote a paper on it the other day.”

He conjured up his memories of the details as he answered, “Problems began to arise when mages started marrying non-mages, which weakened the magic in our bloodlines. From there, the number of people with powerful magic kept falling. That’s when King Leonard strengthened the flexibility of magic to fix the shortage in mages by inventing a stone that mages can imbue with their magic. It’s thanks to that stone that non-mages became capable of easily using magic.

“Then there was something about it being used as a war deterrent against Radius for a pretty long time. Sometime after that, the magic-imbued stones burnt out around the same time the number of mages across the kingdom increased again, so the technology is completely obsolete now or somethin’ like that.”

Mia thought over everything she knew about King Leonard while she listened to Mathias’ history lesson. King Leonard had gone down in the history books for inventing technology meant not for deterring war, but for enriching the quality of people’s lives. Magic could make rain fall upon areas afflicted by a horrible drought, or send sunlight to regions untouched by the sun. He had invented it for times of peace. If what the history books said were true, then he must’ve been heartbroken to see it used for military means, even just for deterrence.

“...I don’t think the technology has gone obsolete. It exists in a way that goes

against the peaceful reasons King Leonard invented it for. That's my theory." Henrik heaved a sorrowful sigh. "They've transformed it into a terribly inhumane monstrosity."

"What are you...implying?"

This isn't something you should hear—Mia couldn't escape that feeling of dread. She was scared to know. Felix put a hand on her trembling shoulder. For some reason, his hands were shaking too.

"Mia. I believe I am about to lay out an extremely cruel theory. Let me emphasize this is nothing more than a theory at this point. Do you still want to know?"

Henrik showed unusual reluctance; the anguish burning in his verdure eyes like flames across a forest only fanned her fears. Pushing back the desire to say no, she nodded deeply.

He finally gathered his resolve. "This kingdom's military found a method to solve the shortages of both their mages and magic stones. They're forcefully siphoning magic from one person and funneling it into another to artificially produce mages. Throwing the body's magic balance into disarray—that is the causation of Isea Kingdom's mysterious diseases. Angel Tears, and for that matter, Demon Claw, are darkness born from Isea's warped political measures."

"Then you're telling me Mom is—" *Being murdered by our own country?* The rest of the words caught in her throat, stealing her breath away. Black specks dashed across her vision, rapidly blotting out the world. She could feel herself on the verge of passing out, just as Felix's hand tightened on her shoulder, holding her from falling into the depths of darkness.

"...*Don't screw with me!* If you're right, then that'd mean *Chris was murdered by Isea!*" His infuriated voice roared from deep inside his gut, startling Mia. Blood trailed down his chin from where he had gnawed his lip. An electric intensity surged from him; it sent Mia's hair standing on end, scaring her so much that she forgot her mother's plight. But the next instant, Felix's eyes peeled back and he clenched his chest, wildly gasping for air. He buckled over and unsteadily crouched low on the ground.

"Felix?!"

Mathias rushed beside him. “Felix! Calm down!” He rubbed Felix’s hunched back. “Mia, he’s having a panic attack!”

“Felix, it’s okay,” Mia soothed, trying to calm Felix, but his mind appeared to be wandering another reality altogether. Her voice couldn’t reach him. “Felix, you’re all right. Please calm down. Don’t breathe in too much!”

But Felix continued to gasp for air as if he were struggling to breathe. Mia spun around to survey the area, but not a single soul was in the abandoned fields of snow. They were forbidden access to the Sanatorium’s clinic, and they had a great distance to go before they would reach the nearest train station.

“It’s not working! He can’t hear us...! Henrik, you’re a med student, aren’t’cha?! Do somethin’!” It was unlike Mathias to lose his cool and seek their help so desperately.

“Spare me from having to nurse some dude out of a panic attack,” Henrik quipped, making the most inappropriate statement for a doctor. “Besides, for all my skill, this isn’t something I can treat. Mia—only you can cure him. Right, Mathias?” He sounded upset.

Mathias hesitated for a second, then figuring it wasn’t the time to argue, he spun to Mia. “You’re the only person to ever calm one of his attacks so fast, Mia. Nobody has ever been able to employ that method with this guy before.” He paused, reluctance contorting his features. “Please help him,” he begged.

Conflicted, Mia stared at him, then realized there was no time for thinking it over. She pulled Felix’s head against her chest, suddenly remembering the flower he had given her, she brought her hand to her hair and pulled the chamomile out from behind her ear. She reached for his hand and wrapped it around the flower, then rubbed his back like a mother soothing a child, just as she had done with him the first time.

“Felix, you’re all right. There’s nothing here to hurt you. Henrik and Mathias are here with you. I’m here too. Everyone here is on your side. Trust me. Slowly breathe out.” She looked straight into his wide-open, icy-blue eyes and slowly continued to assure him that he was okay, over and over again. The gaps between his frantic breaths gradually grew longer.

“Mi...a...” He squeezed Mia’s hand. Her heart skipped a beat from contact

with his big, solid hand, but she pushed down the giddiness and squeezed his hand back. His vacant eyes motionlessly fixed on her, begging her to fill the void.

Mia strongly believed now it was her turn to listen. “Talk to me. About anything. Tell me this time about the darkness you’re fighting.”

Felix squeezed his eyes shut. “C-Chris...entered...the Royal Academy...for me. H-he said he’d...become a mage... Even though he had no magic... Th-There wasn’t any...benefit...sticking around me...but he said...it’s because we’re childhood friends...” Felix explained through gasps. “...I-It’s my fault...all of it.”

Tears overflowed from the icy lakes in his eyes, spilling as haphazardly as a young child’s who’d been fighting to keeping them contained, enduring it until their body shook violently before losing the battle.

Aaah, behind his sunny smile he was fighting back his tears, Mia understood. Controlling your feelings so tightly compounds the pressure of everything you’re holding back, until it eventually explodes like this.

“It’s not your fault,” she insisted. She felt as if she might cry herself.

Felix rattled on, forgetting to breathe as he spoke, “I-I couldn’t...protect him. I-It doesn’t matter what happens...to someone like me. I’m not...w-worth throwing away his life for.”

His heartrending despair threatened to pull Mia under with him. She desperately objected, “I...would be lonely if you weren’t here, Felix. I’m sad when you’re hurt. You matter to me. That’s why I think if I were Chris, I would’ve wanted to protect you too. I’m positive Chris doesn’t regret what he did.” She repeated this endlessly until it registered in his ears.

Felix opened his eyes and stared at her.

His ragged breathing stopped for the brief period he looked straight at her. It was the instant things changed for the better. His painfully knitted brow softened, and the frozen glacier in his eyes melted back into a glimmering, calm lake. Finally regaining himself, Felix clung to Mia passionately.

“Mia. Mia. Mia!”

“Whoa!”

Their positions reversed. Mia felt like a big dog had just jumped on her. The momentum pushed her backwards, so that her butt hit the cold snow; this time, she was the one being hugged against Felix’s chest, messing up her hair.



“H-Hey! Felix?!”

She frantically struggled against him, but his arms were too strong to pry away. Knowing Henrik and Mathias were watching made her so embarrassed she wanted to bury herself in the snow to cool off the heat. She very much wanted to push and kick him off, but she decided against it because he was still a recovering patient.

Oh my gosh... This is a dog. I'll just think of him as a big dog! She told herself, all the while subconsciously blushing furiously from the touch of the broad chest and powerful arms no dog had. *Oh, but...* She abruptly became aware that the utter despair she'd felt after hearing Henrik's theory had dulled. In saving Felix from his darkness, she'd lessened the weight bearing down on her too.

“Uh, okay, enough's enough. You look cured now. Dang, that's some insane cure-all.” Mathias fiercely grabbed the back of Felix's coat.

“Gimme a little longer,” Felix fussed, but Mathias picked him up by the collar and sat him down on the rotting bench.

Mia sighed with relief; she was freed. Henrik observed her with a mixed look of relief and chagrin. “...Can we get back to the main topic now? Mia, what do you want to do?”

She took a deep breath and declared, “I'll write it. I'll write my Grand Plan connecting it to those facts. I can't keep quiet about this. I'll bring it to light... Henrik, after hearing your theory, I'm convinced. I'm positive the patients are quarantined away to hide this conspiracy. Doctor Letts told me the letters from Mom were safe, but had to be kept secret. We had to hide something that was safe? It all makes sense if it's because they don't want the reason for Mom's quarantine—for the patients' disease itself—to be examined.”

“But the military will be your enemy if you write it, you know?”

Obviously, there was no way the military wasn't involved in the plot. Even the usually presumptuous Henrik was concerned over the gravity of the situation. Nevertheless, Mia wouldn't surrender. To her, nothing was scarier than her mom dying.

“That's why I'll do it while I'm a student, without any ties to anything.”

“You’re onto something there,” Felix agreed, fearlessly taking her side. “The Academy is under the royal family’s jurisdiction. It’s an independent organization on paper at least, so there’s little meddling from the military. If we can win the professors over to our side, we should be able to carry out our plans behind-the-scenes.”

Henrik considered it, then nodded decisively.

Only Mathias frowned. “I’m not keen on making enemies with the military...”

The Mage Department was the sole branch within the Academy that was intimately connected with the military. Mathias would be risking the most. Felix grinned and wrapped his arm around his unwilling friend’s shoulder.

“Didn’t you say your professors won’t read the report?”

“...Pretty much, yeah. Anyway, if you’re gonna do it—if everybody’s doin’ it, I’ve got no choice but to join in, do I? Gimme a break already,” Mathias moaned, his shoulders drooping.

Felix’s grin was so bright and cheerful it was unbelievable that just seconds ago, he had broken down into a panic attack. “Sounds like that’s what we’re doing then!”

Chapter 10: Eve of the Deadline

ORANGE light given off by the evening sun shone into the empty classroom after school. Winter had come and gone, and with it, the days grew increasingly longer. For Mia spring brought nothing but panic and impatience. They had to submit their Grand Plan as soon as April's Easter celebrations were over.

Mia and the team spent the remainder of their winter break and the following months interviewing several bereaved families each day. In short order they had deduced that the coincidences could no longer be called coincidences anymore. They quickly discovered that every single patient had taken the mage's entrance exam at Isea Royal Academy. Evidence supporting their theory rapidly piled up, pointedly revealing their theory as reality and further fueling their suspicions that it was now impossible to turn a blind eye to the situation at hand.

The sheer gravity of the implications of their research led them to stop holding their meetings in the library study room. They all concluded it was too much of a risk if anyone overheard them.

Since they would begin consolidating their Grand Plan today, Mia wanted to meet somewhere they could talk and use a blackboard behind closed doors. She asked Professor Einz for the keys to an empty Pharmacology Department classroom.

"When it comes down to it, Angel Tears' primary symptom is an amplification of violent emotions that lead to reckless, out of control behavior until the infected goes insane. I guess it's natural that you'd go mad if your body was pumped full of magic it wasn't meant to have."

Mia wrote what Felix said on the blackboard, then peeked at him from under her eyelashes. As she suspected, gloominess hung over him like a dark cloud. He usually feigned an image of sunny cheerfulness, making it easy to pick up on when he was feeling unusually depressed.

The distraught expression Felix made whenever Angel Tears came up appeared to be due to losing his friend, Chris, to the disease. Mia recalled his frantic yelling on that snowy day in the field. His screams had been unlike anything she'd ever heard before. His voice had been heavy with a deeply buried agony, as if he had been forced to look at his heart after it'd been ripped out of his chest. His expression at the time had reminded her of patients whose faces were clawed off by werebeasts. When she really thought about it, a similar desperation had taken him over when he'd tried to force his medicine on her. Perhaps he saw his deceased friend in her.

Chris... Is that a boy? Or...what if it's a girl? Her thoughts flew to that question against her better judgment, and she found herself confused by her own feelings.

To stop the frazzled feelings from consuming her heart and mind, Mia redirected her energy to the conversation. "On the other hand, Demon Claw's symptoms include lethargy and deterioration of stamina, physical strength, and resistance, along with immunodeficiency. We can conclude these are direct side effects of having one's magic forcefully removed."

"Makes sense that the body's balance would go outta whack by throwin' in or takin' away something our body had lived with from birth... I've a hard time getting outta bed the next day after using up too much magic in class. I think I'd be bed-bound if somebody randomly siphoned it outta me," Mathias grumbled, heaving a deep sigh where he sat on top of a desk next to a window.

His attention wandered outside like he didn't feel up for the discussion. He claimed he was keeping an eye out to warn them if anyone came near, but when Felix had snuck up behind him to play a prank, his fist barely stopped in time from making contact with Felix's face. Mathias was unexpectedly a scaredy-cat for someone with his height and muscles. Or maybe there was something keeping him on edge.

"...In conclusion, by transferring magic from one person to another, the transferor develops immunodeficiency while the transferee develops an adverse reaction to a magic overdose. Quarantine is subsequently enforced on the transferor in order to conceal the coercion involved. As such, Demon Claw's contagion is a groundless claim," Henrik anxiously summarized as he copied the

blackboard's notes onto their report.

"This is going to be our outline, right? I feel like this has diverged considerably from the topic that we submitted for our proposal: 'Is Demon Claw Actually Contagious?' I wonder if this will pass..." He finished filling in the notes and announced, "Okay, I think we're done."

He passed the Grand Plan around for everyone to look through.

It's well done! Mia thought. *It's done. We did it!* Her face flushed with exhilaration.

"I wonder how high the wall will be this time..." Felix thought aloud.

Mia's joy spiraled down, crashing harder than a blimp into the ground. Felix probably meant it as a joke, but it certainly did a fantastic job of crushing her spirits. She sighed. The professors in charge of each department's competition submission forms changed every year, but of all the luck, the rotation had landed on Professor Rueger this year.

Do the fates hate me or what? Anxiety filled Mia as she remembered how tough it was to get her proposal past him.

TOGETHER the team headed to Professor Rueger's office to turn in their Grand Plan, but as luck would have it, he was away. With no other choice, they decided to return later, when the door to the prep room swung open with a pop of steam. Professor Einz was just leaving.

Mia jumped on the opportunity. "Oh, Professor Einz! Do you happen to know where Professor Rueger is?"

"He left for Bruckstadt to give a lecture."

"When will he be back?"

"Tomorrow, I think?"

"We'll come back again later then." Felix shrugged.

"Are you here to submit your Grand Plan for the competition? The other students are leaving theirs in his mailbox."

Professor Einz stepped into the hallway and pointed them to the mailbox in front of Professor Rueger's office. A sturdy lock with ticking gears hung from the white wooden box, which was about the height and length of a piece of paper.

"They are?"

Mia hesitated to follow suit—she had a bad feeling about it. She couldn't shake the memory of how the law student girls had been willing to do whatever it took to interfere with her goals. This time, if they got involved, they might deal the lethal blow. Tomorrow was the final day to turn in their submission.

She slowly turned around and surveyed the area. The hallways were empty, but she couldn't get rid of the feeling that someone was watching her.

"I can give it to him directly for you, if you're worried?" Professor Einz offered, smiling sympathetically. She knew about Mia's situation, so she understood the reason for her excessive anxiety.

Mia confidently handed the stack of papers making up her team's Grand Plan to her reliable professor. Their Grand Plan was heavy, not just because of its volume; part of its weight came from the hard work the team committed to it over the past six months.

"Please...take good care of it."

Intense uneasiness washed over Mia as her hands let go of the Grand Plan. *What do I do if this doesn't work? But we worked so hard on it. I'm sure it'll work out somehow.* She prayed with everything she had, *Please, please, God, let this Grand Plan make it through.*

"This is the embodiment of all your endeavors. All of you did such a good job. You can rest assured that I have it now, and I'll be sure to hand it to Professor Rueger first thing tomorrow." Professor Einz's angelic smile disappeared back into the prep room, the door shutting automatically behind her with another pop of steam.

"It's over! We did it!" Mia and the group cheered. She finally felt the weight lift off their shoulders.

"Want to go have a drink to celebrate in advance?" Felix proposed, stretching his hands over his head.

“Sure,” Mia happily agreed. She walked off toward the cafeteria, feeling like the shackles had been taken off her feet. Then she realized they were one pair of feet short. She turned around.

Henrik stayed behind glaring at the mailbox.

“You aren’t coming, Henrik?” she asked.

He lightly shook his head. “Go on ahead without me. I just remembered I have something to do,” he said and ran off in the direction of the dorms.

Chapter 11: An Unthinkable Outcome

IT was the day of the deadline. Grand Plan submissions were due by that evening. But everyone who had finished their Grand Plan, like Mia's team, would finally be released from the extra workload. A sense of liberation filled the air.

Professor Rueger checked over the stacks one last time as the bells rang, marking the end of fourth period. "Has anyone forgotten to submit their Grand Plan?" His eyes raked across the classroom and locked with Mia's. She quietly nodded, comfortable in her seat, confident since her team had safely submitted theirs yesterday. Taking her nod as confirmation, he announced, "I'll no longer be accepting submissions now."

Classmates who had also entered the competition rejoiced, "We're done!" Liberated, Mia hummed as she put away her textbooks, until Professor Rueger walked up to her.

He doesn't usually want to talk, she thought, giving him a wide-eyed look, her hands hovering over the last textbook she had to put away.

He let out a small sigh. "So you guys gave up in the end. And after how much you annoyed me with it too. I'm disappointed in you." Disillusioned, he patted Mia on the shoulder and left the classroom.

What? What's he talking about? What does this mean?!

Confused, Mia ran after Professor Rueger on his way to Pharmacology Hall. She immediately shouted his name once she stepped out of the building into the back quad.

"Professor Rueger! Um, was the subject and contents of our Grand Plan that bad?"

He didn't slow his pace. His back remained stiff, radiating profound irritation. "What contents? I can't grade what hasn't been turned in to me."

No way! Mia turned white. “Excuse me! Professor! We submitted our Grand Plan yesterday!”

He finally stopped, turning around with a skeptical eyebrow raised. “It wasn’t there when I checked my mailbox this morning?”

“We entrusted it to Professor Einz! She promised she would give it to you personally—”

“You did? Aaah, too bad, she’s out today with a high fever. She passed out on campus last night and was sent to the hospital.”

“She did?!”

Icy doom crept up from the ground and coiled around Mia’s legs. She didn’t want to believe it. Whatever the circumstances, was it truly possible for such a coincidence to have happened, right there and then? Last night, Professor Einz had appeared like the very picture of health. Suspicion roiled inside, but Mia pushed aside her feelings for now. The Grand Plan was the priority.

“I’ll submit another copy to you now.”

“You can’t. Did I not just announce I wouldn’t be accepting more submissions? I gave you countless reminders.”

The blood drained from Mia’s face. “I didn’t say anything because I was certain we turned ours in...!” Her legs buckled and her knees collided with the ground.

“It’s unfortunate,” he said, not even batting an eye at her collapsed on the ground, “but...the rules can’t be changed based on my sole discretion.” His gentle words were iced with absolute rejection. He was angry.

“I had high hopes for you. I thought your team might be able to pull it off,” he continued, disgust building in his voice, “But my first impression was right all along—you had no endgame. You failed to follow through. You won’t make it anywhere with such halfhearted attempts when you’re responsible for the lives of others. That’s the path you chose. If this had really mattered to you more than anything in the world, why didn’t you deliver it to me personally, instead of entrusting its fate to someone else? You failed.”

“Your inexperience could’ve been offset had you just submitted it to me,” Professor Rueger finished ruefully. He left. Mia sat there dumbly, frozen, her hands splayed across the cold ground. Her head pounded with disbelief at the impossible turn of events.

“How?” Mia wanted to believe it was a lie. Her throat ached. “How did this happen?!” she screamed. The traffic in the back quad stopped, startled by her bitter outcry. She couldn’t care less.

Professor Einz is taking the day off because of a sudden high fever? This must be some kind of conspiracy. Her previous feelings of suspicion were multiplying. Though she felt guilty for getting Professor Einz involved, she couldn’t stop the dark, furious, hateful disgust from bursting through.

Didn’t Professor Einz *know* just how much Mia and her team had put into their Grand Plan?! Mia wasn’t cruel enough to blame her for not delivering their Grand Plan at the expense of her health, but would it have *killed* her to have *at least* gotten in touch with them?

Giggles erupted from behind Mia. She slowly pushed off the ground and turned to face them. *They must have come to have a good laugh.* Just as she expected, she was greeted by their delighted sneers.

“This kinda thing happens when you lose yourself around three handsome guys,” Angelica jeered, her flunkies joined in running off similar snarky remarks behind her.

Mia was surrounded by the nasty glares of spiteful girls. Although girls from the Pharmacology Department were among their ranks, not a single person in the back quad’s crowd would take Mia’s side.

“Law student Felix Keyserling, mage student Mathias Weiss, and med student Henrik Vigant. Weren’t you just having a blast ensnaring three attractive top-class boys, blessed with the best families, lineages, and skills? Haven’t you had your fill yet? This Academy is acclaimed for its virtues of equality. You have to share *equal* opportunities with the rest of us.”

Angelica’s words sounded like a foreign language to Mia. She found it mysterious how drastically their perspectives of the world differed.

“Were you the ones who did it?” Mia charged.

“Did what?” Angelica snickered.

Mia continued, demanding, “Were you the ones who did something to Professor Einz?! Did you use the same sick method you did when you froze me?! DID YOU?!” It rang of truth the moment she had spoken it aloud. Professor Einz’s sudden fever was similar to the one Mia went through after she was frozen with magic.

“Excuse me?! Don’t be stupid,” Angelica replied, disgusted. “We haven’t done anything! We just came to laugh at you for getting what you deserve, obviously!” She snorted and turned to leave, but Mia’s hand shot out and grabbed her wrist, squeezing so tightly that Angelica couldn’t escape.

“Let go of me!”

Mia’s nails dug into her wrist, fury bringing tears to her eyes. “Mom will—*lots* of people will die. Can you still go on laughing?”

The corners of Angelica’s eyes sharply angled upward. “You *always* act like the victim. I despise that about you,” she spat. “Don’t think you’re the only one with problems. What does it matter if it’s for your mom? My mom died ages ago.”

Her unexpected confession surprised Mia.

“I was raised by my wet nurse, so I didn’t miss her or feel sad at all. Nobles are like that. Quite a few kids don’t even know their mother’s name or face. I can’t understand *why* you’d want to save your mom, or *why* it would matter if you lost her. I don’t understand... So yes, I *can* laugh at you.”

Mia’s grip weakened; Angelica took the opportunity to pull her hand away and leave. Losing a target to direct her anger at, she stared vacantly at her hands as her thoughts twisted in on her. Eventually misery won out and she was unable to withstand it any longer.

Drip. Drip. Raindrops fell, leaving polka dots on the cement in their wake. Then the polka dots gave way to gray, and a misty veil hung over the area. Color was vanishing from the world in front of her eyes—just like her hope.

Somebody, help me... Felix...I need you. Reflexively, Mia scanned the area for Felix. He always came running to Mia in her worst times. He always comforted her. So somehow, she unconsciously believed that he would show up for her this time too.

But no matter how much time passed and the rain soaked her, he didn't show up. Before she knew it, the sun had set, but the moon and stars were absent from the rainy sky. Instead of the person she'd hoped for, it was a frantic Mathias and an unusually pale Henrik that came searching for Mia in the darkness.

"Mia!" he shouted in a panic.

"Felix broke into the Sanatorium! And they're freaking out that he might be infected with Demon Claw now!"

The news they brought her was unbelievable, and the obscene scandal of a noble breaking into the Sanatorium sent the entire Academy into an uproar.

Chapter 12: The Sanatorium

SEVERAL hours earlier:

Guards and medical staff had surrounded Felix at a distance inside the Sanatorium. They treated him like a poisonous insect—no, they treated him like he was a heinous, deadly virus. He had never been treated this way before in his entire life.

He made his decision to go through with the plan he'd been sitting on all this time as a last-ditch effort when he learned that their Grand Plan hadn't been accepted. Odds were that using this plan meant he would lose his place at the Academy. Consequently, he'd no longer be able to stay by her side.

But Felix's hesitation was gone. He didn't want to see Mia cry again. It was easy to wipe away her tears, and offering her comforting words was simple, but even if he could dry her tears, she'd still shed more. He had to get rid of the source of her tears.

So Felix left the job of comforting her to other men and made his way *here*. He was well-aware that he was the only person who could play this role.

He didn't try his luck at the front gates, which were heavily guarded, opting instead to circle around through the forests edge, away from any prying eyes. Once he was out of sight he set his pack down and began removing the tools to enact his plan. First was the Autoclave—a razor-sharp set of hooks that embedded themselves through judicious use of prefilled steam tanks into a surface and dragged the user up nearly any flat object.

The second was a map that provided the Sanatorium's layout, this had taken a number of favors to acquire, but it showed the updated designs for the First and Second Wall, along with the original plans for the Quarantine Ward, with notes added on where the most likely room to hold patients would be. His final items were a scarf to hide his identity, a canteen that would begin releasing a black smoke that would confuse Auto Guards, and if all else failed, a medallion

provided only to royalty to identify family members—this was his get out of the gallows free card if everything went wrong.

With a nod, he looped the Autoclave's safety belt around his waist, aimed the main attachment toward the massive First wall, and fired. Felix stifled a yelp, knocked onto his butt by the massive recoil. He watched in dumbfounded confusion as the claw flew into the air, silver wire following it up, up, and then down.

Shouting, Felix leaped to the side as the claw flew down toward him. He scrambled away as the claw bounced into the forest.

"I guess it's good that I followed Amre's advice..." Moving back to the bag, he retrieved his backup Autoclave, and this time readied for the recoil. This time the claw flew up and over the ledge, and with a massive clang, latched into place.

Pack in place, Felix steadily ascended the first wall, letting the main attachment drag him up the side, keeping close watch on the remaining steam canister.

Several backbreaking minutes later, he finally dragged himself to the top of the First Wall and stared in abject horror at just how high he was. Around him he could make out the massive forest and plains that surrounded the Sanatorium. When he turned around, he stood amazed at the massive dome before him, and the equally large Second Wall that separated the clinic from the Quarantine Wards within.

At this height he could make out the entire Sanatorium; the First Wall blocked people from sneaking in. There was a fairly large space of wild untamed ground between the First and Second Walls and several buildings that likely served as clinics and housing for medical staff and security guards. From what he could see, over the Second Wall was the top of a massive dome.

Blinking at the distance down, Felix realized he was going to have to descend and then climb the next wall and likely descend again. "What have I gotten myself into?"

SWEAT dripped down the side of Felix's face, it took him what felt like a lifetime to descend and ascend each wall. With an exhausted sigh he disconnected the final strap and fell the last two feet to the ground right next to the massive dome of what his map labeled as the Quarantine Ward.

"Finally! So tired!" Hands tightening into fists, he pumped himself up, "Mia is depending on me!"

Map in hand, he followed the dome around to what should be a service entrance. It took some walking, but he eventually found a door guarded by two Auto Guards. Steam hissed from them as they both moved instantly toward him, their halberds snapping down in his direction.

"Wait! Wait!" Felix spilled the contents of his pack onto the ground in a desperate search of the smoke canister, the guards stepped closer, their internal mechanisms groaning with increased urgency as they sought to kill or apprehend him.

Just when he thought he would be caught, both Auto Guards froze in place, and lowered their weapons, their attention locked on the medallion that had slid from his pack.

"Right, you guys know what that is..." He glanced at the locked door, and the lock pick kit he had, and back to the Auto Guards. "Any chance one of you can open that door?"

A shudder ran through both units before one of them returned to the door and caused the pressurized bolts to release their steam and slowly pop open.

"All right! You two are awesome!" Felix gathered the contents of his bag and rushed inside the domed Quarantine Ward. "Keep up the good work!" he praised before vanishing inside.

FELIX had been wandering the halls of the Quarantine Ward to no success. So many areas seemed completely unused, the spots marked on his map where patients should be, lay empty with a thin layer of dust. Empty cots appeared to have been used at one point but now smelled of dust and decay.

So far every room had been more of the same, and he was beginning to

despair as he opened the next door. An elderly woman spun around at his entrance, she was dressed from head to toe in an overdone thick rubber suit—likely protective clothing—with only her face visible through the clear plastic mask. Behind her lay dozens of cots covered with domes of hazmat plastic. At first, Felix thought that was all there was to them; until he saw pale, sickly people move inside. The woman stepped forward as if to protect the patients behind her, a look of utter rage in her visage.

“Leave here this instant! You are placing my patients in danger just by being in this room as you are! You can’t say you don’t know what this place is.”

Felix had good reason not to back down. He quietly took a step through the door into the Isolation Ward that actually had people in it. With its sanitary white walls and clanging pipes, this room was cleaned to an obsessive level unlike the previous unused rooms.

“It’s dangerous here. Do you have a death wish?” she threatened in a low voice taking a step forward, contradicting her previously docile posture. She put her body in between Felix and his destination.

“But I won’t get infected, will I? We’ve looked into it. We have solid evidence.”

The elderly woman shook her head and pulled out an oddly shaped turtle shell with a handle and trigger on the bottom. From the tip oozed a pungent smell of hot-peppers causing Felix’s eyes to water even at a distance. The weapon was likely filled with some form of irritant to keep aggressive patients in check.

She’s serious. Felix cringed at the thought of being sprayed by the contents of that weapon but stood his ground.

“*Can* I be infected?” Fear and panic rose in him. He wanted it all to be a misunderstanding. He focused on her face, hopeful she’d prove him wrong.

“You can,” she austerely confirmed, holding his gaze. She definitely didn’t look like she was lying.

Felix thought of Mia’s drive and clenched his teeth. Cutting through the last of his hesitation, he firmly fixed his mind on what had to be done. “Then...that’s all

the more reason I need to be kept here.”

For Mia’s sake.

Felix’s mother didn’t exist—at least on paper. Her low birthright kept her from recognition as his father’s wife or as his mother.

In accordance with the rules of the land, Felix had been ripped away from his mother in his infancy and raised without one. Strictness had marked his upbringing, and he was taught to avoid asking for anything or relying on anyone. Love had been absent from his childhood. He’d done everything possible to meet his father’s expectations, but when his first attack had come, out of nowhere, he instantly became a failure. In his father’s eyes, a quitter. From then on, his attacks would occur incessantly, at every little thing that cropped up to trigger them.

He understood why now that he was older—he was lonely. His body had learned people would pay attention to him, coddle him, if he was writhing in pain. But once they learned that his attacks posed no threat to his life, they returned to neglecting him. He was fine as long as he didn’t die. Furthermore, his father had concluded his son was soft and overly reliant, so from then on no one had dared to comfort him again. Even the doctors began prescribing him medicine that was nothing more than a placebo for placating a child.

Around the time he unconsciously began to doubt whether his existence had a purpose and if his life had value, *that incident* occurred, as if to kick him while he was already down and struggling on the ground.

He’d believed these were wounds that would never heal. Guilt whispered to him and kept the wounds fresh. If he moved on, he’d be betraying his friend. But then, Mia had found him and said, “It’s not your fault,” as she caressed his bleeding heart with her empathy. She’d effectively healed his wounds. She’d taken a young man who’d been stuck in the past and changed him to look toward the future.

Mia didn’t know just how desperate he’d been, that she had saved him from the brink of no return. He wanted to repay her for what she’d done for him. From the bottom of his heart, he wanted to return warmth to her life—to return her mother to her.

“I want to save Mia. We have to create a cure for Demon Claw no matter the cost,” he earnestly pleaded with the woman.

“Make a medicine? Mia? Are you talking about Mia Baumann?” Surprise flickered in her eyes.

“You know Mia?”

“...I see. So Letts finally passed away. I guess it’s my turn next?” she muttered, without answering him.

Felix’s eyes widened at the name of Mia’s mentor.

After a long pause, the elderly woman gestured back to the door Felix had entered through. “Let’s talk, but not here. You put them at risk just by being in here.” Felix glanced at the sickly patients behind the doctor and allowed her to guide him back into the hall where she sealed the door shut.

“Follow me.” With a nod she led him further down the hall through a set of doors into what looked like it had once served as a cafeteria of some kind. She gestured to a table and chairs, taking off her helmet to reveal a pale-skinned elderly woman with graying hair and sunken eyes. “Have a seat, I will get us some tea, and then you can tell me your story.”

As she walked off into a back room, Felix was beginning to wonder if he had made a mistake, but was pleasantly surprised when the woman returned with tea instead of security.

“All right, then! Let’s hear your story, and be sure to leave nothing out. Tell me everything you know about Mia!”

AMID the chaos swarming like someone had poked a hornet’s nest, Mia dragged Henrik and Mathias along with her to try and escape the borders of the Royal Academy. Leaving campus during weekdays was strictly forbidden, so she was planning to take advantage of the mayhem and make a run for it, but the Academy had a large automobile parked out front due to the emergency. Starting with Professor Rueger, the Law Department’s Professor Kesten, Mage Department’s Assistant Professor Bahr, the headmaster, and an unfamiliar gentleman with a magnificent mustache climbed into the vehicle.

The huge automobile looked like it could fit additional passengers. Mia made a beeline for the automobile and banged on the window. “Professor Rueger! Please, please take us with you!”

“It’s too dangerous. You stay here.”

“But...!” Mia divulged her greatest fear, “What will you do if Felix has another attack?! I can cure him on the spot!”

Professor Rueger sent a questioning look to the mustache gentleman behind him, who appeared to have authority over the situation. The man nodded, and Professor Rueger opened the door. Mia piled into the automobile with Henrik and Mathias climbing in after her.

MIA’S first ride in an automobile was nauseating. Whether it was because the driver was horrible, the roads were bad, or steam powered vehicles were unstable, the automobile shook, trembled, popped, and clanged as it rolled along the roads, puffs of steam billowing behind it. Each time the car bounced a foot off the ground, Mia bounced off her seat. Reaching her limit, she fished through her bag for a motion-sickness tonic and drank some. She had Henrik and Mathias take a swig as well.

Mia clung on to her seat for dear life as she complained, careful not to bite her tongue, “Why’d he go and do something so stupid?! Our theory is still nothing more than a theory—”

“He obviously did it for you, Mia,” Henrik cut in, irritation coating his voice and expression. “I won’t let you say you don’t understand. What he’s done will become a piece of solid proof to back our claims.”

The same method had lingered in the recesses of her mind, but she’d sworn to herself to never take it. Yet, a completely unrelated party, Felix, had taken the step she hadn’t had the guts for.

“...Are you saying he’s trying to prove our theory with his life on the line?”

“You can bet on it. I’ve always thought he was an idiot, but not to this extent. We still had other options to try. The least he could’ve done was discuss it with us. Felix is *remarkably* self-centered. Is that a way to treat your friends?”

Mia's eyes rounded, and she stared intently at Henrik. "You think...we're friends?"

"Huh?!" Henrik's voice cracked. Then he went on another tirade, "Aah, so that's how you view me, Mia. Let me be clear, Felix's self-centeredness is cute compared to yours." He was red to his ears.

Is he super mad at me? Or is he embarrassed? Happy to discover that Henrik thought of them as friends, Mia struggled to tamp the inappropriate grin pulling on her lips. Mathias smiled wryly at them and roughly messed up Henrik's platinum hair with his big hand.

"Don't worry. Your theory ain't wrong. Felix won't get infected. He charged in there because he believes you," Mathias reassured. "I believe ya too. Otherwise, it'll be bye-bye to my head."

"Your head?"

"Nevermind." Mathias shut up just as the driver stepped on the brakes. Mia slid forward and nearly collided with the seat in front of her if not for Mathias shooting out a steadying hand to stop her.

"Thank you!"

"No problem."

An earthy scent, from fields filled with ears of wheat, tickled Mia's nose. Beyond the automobile's fogged windows towered the menacing Sanatorium they'd visited during winter break. Mia and the team exited the hissing vehicle after the professors.

This time, the security promptly opened the gates for them. Was it because it was a crisis?

Mia was quietly following behind Mathias when she slammed into his hard back because he'd abruptly stopped walking.

In the center of the monstrous cafeteria was Felix, restrained by one of the doctors in a rubber protective suit. Ropes were wound tightly around him, securing him to a chair as if he were some sort of violent criminal.

His golden hair was an utter mess. Felix had thrown his usual calm to the

wind, yelling hysterically over and over, "Hurry and call for President Strickler!"

The mustached gentleman stepped in front of the group and into the room. Mia took that to mean he was the Royal Academy's president, but she didn't remember seeing him at the entrance ceremony.

One of the medical assistants gave him a grave explanation. "This young man climbed over both walls and infiltrated Isolation Ward within the Quarantine Ward, where he interacted with the patients. This is an offense unheard of. What's gone wrong with the way you teach at the Royal Academy? What a disappointment on all fronts."

President Strickler walked forward with a look of utter exasperation. "...Now then, why would you go and do something so stupid? Hmm?" he demanded, stopping ten steps away from Felix, perhaps from fear of infection.

"President," Felix addressed in a calmer voice, "I have been infected with Demon Claw. You *will* have a medicine made for me, won't you? Medicine you wouldn't waste time making for poor commoners, you have no choice but to create for me."

"Well, when you put it that way... But who knows what the brass will say. My position isn't powerful enough to do what you're asking of me."

"You might be rotten, but you're still royalty. You have the power to bring your opinion to the table. Exert your influence on parliament and wring a budget out of them."

"Rotten? ...Hey, aren't you being hard on me?" President Strickler made a woeful frown and looked to the professors, seeking agreement.

He's...royalty...?

Mia took the opportunity to scrutinize the first member of royalty she'd ever met. He had golden hair that was streaked with gray, and stunning blue eyes, but...if she was honest, his most impressive feature was just his mustache. He otherwise seemed like a run-of-the-mill old man. Rude as it may be to think so, nothing about him looked like someone who had power. If she had to say why, it was because he simply lacked ambition.

"Why would you go out of your way to make medicine for Keyserling?"

Professor Rueger asked. But right after, he apparently arrived at the answer, because he clapped his hands together. “Aah...now it makes sense.”

“Hah, so the idiot knew how to idiotically use himself as a weapon,” Henrik whispered, a hint of worry in his voice.

Mia caught on. “It’s my fault. I’m the one who told him they don’t develop medicine for sick commoners. That’s why he used his status as a noble to...” Suddenly understanding the meaning behind his determined expression the last time they had talked, Mia’s heart squeezed. She clenched her fist in front of her heart.

“Try to understand.” Mathias sighed and patted Mia a few times on the head. Whenever he did that, he seemed like he was years older; someone reliable who knew more, that she could lean on. The tears she had been keeping in check overflowed at his kind gesture.

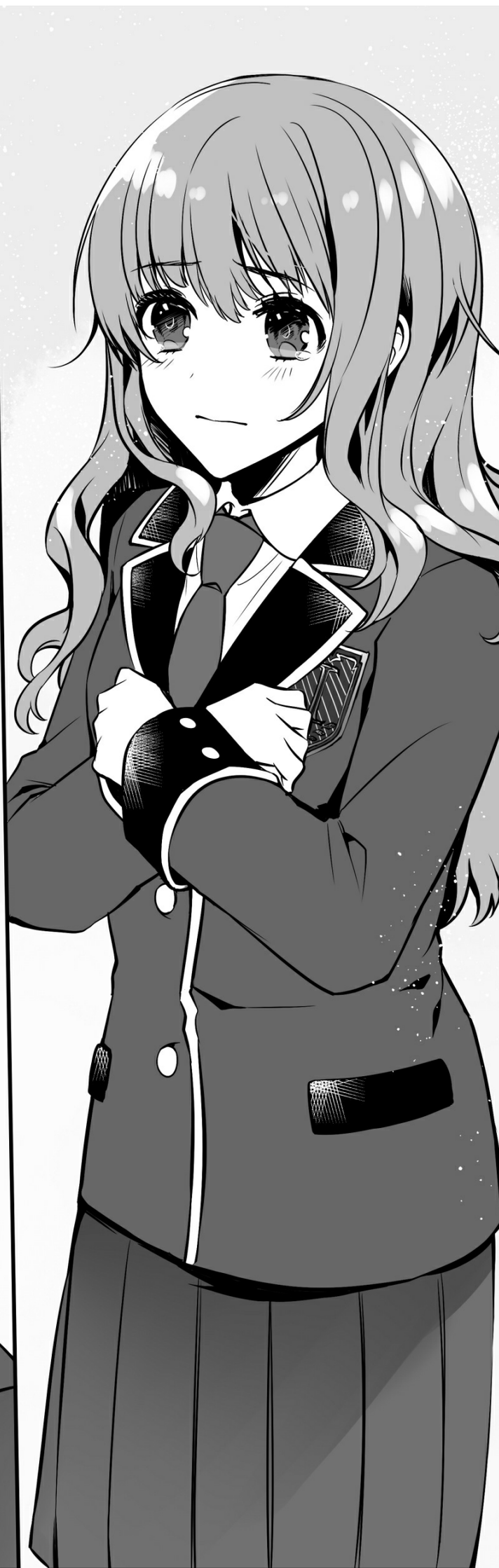
“I thought I understood, but...I didn’t think he’d go this far. This isn’t what I wanted.” Mia hugged herself with trembling arms. “I haven’t done anything to deserve all he’s risking for me.”

“He’s not payin’ back a debt. He doesn’t want anything in return.”

“Yeah.”

I can’t say we’re different anymore. He doesn’t want anything in return for his kindness. He’s satisfied just by being the one who gives.

“Mia.” She lifted her head—Felix was looking right at her. “I honestly didn’t want to do this. I wanted to help you with my own strength. But doing this should resolve everything... I just don’t want to see you cry anymore,” he admitted, then graced her with his sunny smile.



I like you.

Mia took his actions, smile, and the look in his eyes as an appeal for her to understand his feelings. Her heart squeezed and throbbed, and her tears were tempted to spill forth once more.

Step by step, she ignored the shrieks, bellows, and screams telling her to stop as she came closer to Felix.

“Mia Baumann! STOP! You mustn’t touch him! Our country is *doomed* if the infection spreads!” the president raved like a madman.

Henrik observed his reaction. “I get it. We might be able to bring the truth to light,” he whispered to Mathias.

He and Mathias immediately emulated Mia and approached Felix.

“Henrik Vigant! Mathias Weiss! Stop!” Professor Rueger shouted.

Though the other professors and everyone else present begged them to stop, they weren’t prepared to face their deeply rooted fear of infection and physically restrain the kids.

Seeing their reaction, Henrik tilted his head to the side in wonder and abruptly stopped walking. He surveyed the entire room carefully and cocked his head again.

Mia reached Felix alone. The woman in the protective suit alone stood between Mia and Felix. Thinking they were saved, the faculty stopped yelling and waited for her to restrain Mia instead.

“Stay back. Are you going to claim the same foolish idea, that you won’t get infected?”

“It’s not a foolish idea. I really won’t get infected. We’re convinced we won’t be infected. And we’re about to prove it to everyone present!” Mia and the doctor stared each other down.

This isn’t just something we made up. Please understand. Mia held her gaze, refusing to look away. Mia earnestly hoped she’d understand. A few silent minutes, filled with nothing but the sound of pressurized pipes, passed before the doctor finally stepped out of Mia’s way.

“So you’re Mia. Letts’ favorite apprentice.”

“You know Doctor Letts?” Mia asked in surprise.

“He often talked about you at the Medical Association’s gathering. It only happened once a year though,” she briefly answered, then went on, “I’ll support your theory. Ever since the day I was granted permission to step into this dismal hellhole, I’ve been hoping that someone like you kids would come here. I’ve waited for the door to the outside world to be tossed open. Letts always said he’d bring the truth to light somehow, and it looks like the seed he planted grew just right.”

The doctor stood up straight, her rubber suit squeaking, and raked her gaze over each person in the cafeteria. Then she deeply inhaled and proclaimed, “He is not infected. Naturally, he couldn’t be—Demon Claw is *not contagious*.”

The assistant standing beside the doctor leapt at her, grabbed her neck, and slammed her against the concrete wall. “Chief Kreutzer, you seem to have made an erroneous statement. Would you care to correct your mistake?” He definitely wasn’t treating her like she was his boss or the chief of this Sanatorium.

Everyone froze. Doctor Kreutzer painfully, yet firmly objected, “Who are you calling chief? What a farce. I’ve been confined to this hellhole just the same as our patients. We’re exactly the same as patients who will die if they don’t cut off contact with the ‘germs’ in the outside world. I—no, *we doctors* aren’t allowed to live unless we sever all ties to the outside world. And they,” she gestured to the walls lined with people clad in rubber suits, faces veiled by the masks, “*pretend* to be medical assistants, when they’re really our jailors.”

The assistant who had his hand around her throat pinned her with a menacing glare. Mia found herself thinking, if he could kill her with his eyes, he would’ve. She shuddered when she realized he would’ve snapped Doctor Kreutzer’s neck, had there not been a full audience to witness it.

Then another realization dawned on her, after all this time—she had practically never seen Doctor Letts leave the premise of his clinic or its Sanatorium. In other words, he had been just as much of a prisoner to his workplace as this doctor was. He never informed her about anything because

he hadn't wanted them to steal away her freedom as well.

"You volunteered of your own free will to help them. Confidentiality was a part of the terms of your contract," the assistant stated icily. Doctor Kreutzer didn't flinch. Resolve burning in her eyes, she met his death glare with a hard stare.

"Anyone would keep their mouth shut when their patients are taken hostage. I only wanted to help the sick, dying people here. The people who will die if they catch a simple cold. The people who no one will save, who we are not even allowed to attempt to make a medicine for, who are left to rot away to be forgotten with the passage of time."

"We've worked on a medicine. But it's not POSSIBLE to make," the assistant shouted.

Rage surged from the pit of Mia's being, propelling her into action. "YOU'RE LYING! You haven't even *tried* to make a medicine! You've prioritized Angel Tears and put Demon Claw on the back burner. Of course you would. Because the disease known as Demon Claw won't ever occur again if you don't want it to! Once the current afflicted people die you won't need a medicine for it anymore, so *you're just trying to wait out the tide until they're all dead!*"

Absolute bafflement crossed many faces in the dead silent hall.

"What are you on about?" Professor Rueger asked, as the representative of the faculty.

"Mia, take this." Henrik held out an envelope. Wiping away her tears, Mia accepted it, surprised by what was inside. What she pulled out was their team's Grand Plan.

"How...?" For some reason, the Grand Plan she'd unquestionably turned in to Professor Einz was now in her hands.

"Didn't think using Professor Einz to deliver it was enough insurance. Professor Rueger," Henrik turned and addressed their professor, "I've put another copy of this same Grand Plan in your mailbox, under Mathias' and my name. Please check for it later. If it catches your interest, I hope you will allow us to add Felix and Mia's name to it."

“You submitted it with just your and Mathias Weiss’ name?”

“I had a hunch someone would interfere with our submission if Mia’s name was on it. I kept Felix’s off just in case too.”

“Let me look it over.” Professor Rueger hesitantly stepped forward to accept the envelope from Mia. Then he took out the Grand Plan and began to read it. “The causation of Demon Claw is immunodeficiency, which occurs when there is a sudden and drastic decrease of the body’s natural magic levels. This is purposefully induced, and the magic siphoned from Demon Claw patients, through a reformed version of Neu-Aera Technology, is then directly injected into an applicable candidate to produce an artificial mage. Consequently, an excessive increase in the body’s magic levels causes an outbreak of Angel Tears ...?”

He turned blue as he reached the conclusion written in the Grand Plan’s abstract and looked up, wide-eyed, at President Strickler. President Strickler responded with an arched eyebrow, urging Professor Rueger to continue.

Professor Rueger promptly read on, “The basis for this theory is the following:

First, the outbreak for both diseases occurred approximately at the same time.

Second, we repeatedly found that patients of Demon Claw were of the same exact age, and all had taken and failed the entrance exams of Isea Royal Academy’s Mage Department.

Third, there were an inexplicably large number of students who enrolled in the Academy’s Mage Department who developed Angel Tears that same year.

Above all else, there is an extremely high chance Demon Claw is not contagious.

※ Researcher Mia Baumann was not infected even though she regularly handled letters she had received from her infected mother.

Despite all of the aforementioned facts, patients are systematically quarantined, more heavily than likely warranted. If not for precautions regarding infection, the next, most logical reason would be that it is meant to conceal another truth...” Professor Rueger stopped reading again.

President Strickler shot Felix an annoyed look. “An audacious and extremely dangerous theory you’ve got there...”

“But we took the appropriate measures to line up several evidence-based facts. You finished analyzing the medical charts, yes?” Felix flashed an intrepid grin.

“...You’re a walking magnet for disaster. You know I took this easy job because I loathe getting involved in trouble.”

“Please do your job to earn your pay.”

Watching their banter from the sidelines led Mia to speculate about their relationship. *They seem really close... How do they know each other? Is it because Felix was held back a year?*

In contrast, Professor Rueger was thrilled and began to rave about their theory, drawing Mia’s attention back to him. “If your theory is right, then it’d mean the military is afraid of losing their mage forces, so they’re desperate to hide it... Indeed, this would explain why huge funds are given to Angel Tears’ research and none for Demon Claw, or any other topics for that matter!”

“There’s no funding for other diseases?!” Mia’s eyes went round.

He nodded. “Other diseases don’t have any sponsors. That’s why the faculty is stuck with researching Angel Tears and making their students participate. Nothing can be done without money. But if you win the competition, you’ll receive research funds directly from Isea Kingdom instead. No one can complain if you receive money from the Kingdom. I was being hard on your topic because I wanted you to make something you could win with. I try to support passionate students and help them succeed, you see.”

Mia was astonished to learn how Professor Rueger felt for the first time. He hadn’t been trying to bully them? Guilt and shame hit her. *Oh my gosh! I’m so sorry for calling you a wall and other bad things!*

“This will win, won’t it?” Henrik stepped in front of her and grinned at their professor.

Professor Rueger gave a hearty nod. “This topic wouldn’t have been possible without the joint effort of the Law Department, Mage Department, Medical

Department, and Pharmacology Department. You think I'd stand to let them bury such an intriguing topic? I'll stake everything on getting this through." Fierce determination lit his eyes as his gaze swept over his fellow professors.

Were they frightened of making an enemy of the military? The Mage Department's Assistant Professor Bahr looked conflicted, while the Academy's headmaster and the Law Department's Professor Kesten averted their eyes. Only President Strickler quietly nodded.

"Very well then, you there, release the Doctor..." The assistant hesitated, but under the steady gaze of the president Doctor Kreutzer was released. "Miss Baumann, Doctor, if you would follow me, I have a number of pointed questions I need answered." He headed for a nearby office. "I hate extra work, so we are going to proceed under the terms I set out, and the rest of you will follow without question! Am I understood?"

Everyone in the room silently nodded and hurried to follow. Mia was at the front of the group, a tiny smile pulling at her lips.

Silence reigned as the cafeteria emptied out. "Uhh... Guys? Somebody? What about me?" Felix called but no one answered. "Isn't anyone going to untie me?" he shouted shaking back and forth in his chair. "GUYS!"

Chapter 13: The Third Safety Measure

WHEN Mia attended class as usual the next day, she quickly noticed how overtly people had changed with how differently they now treated her. Compared to how they completely ignored her at the beginning of the school year, this was like an obnoxious joke. Classmates fled screaming whenever she set foot inside a classroom. It'd gotten so ridiculous, Mia thought she might wind up as the sole attending student for her pharmacology classes. Except pharmacology professors weren't holding classes, opting to come up with one lame excuse after another for their continued absence. A fair amount of time appeared to be necessary before the Royal Academy would return to normal.

Rumors had spread across the Royal Academy like wildfire about Felix contracting Demon Claw from trespassing Sanatorium grounds, and he was also absent because the guards had booked him for questioning about why he'd broken the law to infiltrate the Sanatorium. For caution's sake, they had ordered him a complete physical exam as well. Even if he was cleared, a faculty meeting determined it would be best if he remained confined at his residence until the mayhem had settled. Meanwhile, Mia, Henrik, and Mathias had no reason to stay home from school as they hadn't come in contact with any of the patients.

Unfortunately, rumors of their association with Felix spread with terrifying speed, and they were treated as if they bore the plague. Not that Mia could blame her classmates for it. The team had a long ways to go before they could definitively prove that Demon Claw wasn't contagious. This wasn't something people would believe overnight, even if Mia waved the proof in front of their faces.

"I guess that's one case closed?" Mia muttered to herself.

The whole commotion about Felix catching Demon Claw was an act put on by Doctor Kreutzer—the elderly woman in the hazmat suit. Truth was, she had

segregated Felix from the patients in order to protect them from any germs he might have carried into the sanitized facility, so even if their theory was somehow wrong and the disease really could be spread through contact, Felix still wouldn't have contracted the virus.

All evidence indicated that Felix would be promptly diagnosed as healthy and free of disease. Rumors would die down once news of the results spread. Mia was very curious about how the public was going to deal with the fact that he had broken into the Sanatorium's Quarantine and Isolation Wards and not been infected.

The military will probably bury it. She let out a small sigh.

"Someone's optimistic. How's this a case closed? Nothing's been settled at all," a voice groaned from above her head.

Henrik and Mathias were standing behind her chair in the empty classroom, evidently having fled the same plague treatment as her. With his love of isolation, Henrik seemed unfazed by the situation. On the other hand, Mathias wasn't used to being ostracized at all. Exhaustion showed through on his face as he leaned back on one of the desks.

"Oh dear... Were you guys left out too?" Mia asked.

They both nodded.

"Ya can't chalk this up to somethin' as cute as being 'left out.'" Mathias forced a bitter smile through his unusual listlessness. Mia's intuition had been right: for as big and brawny as he was, Mathias was surprisingly sensitive.

"So, why isn't anything settled?"

"I don't think Professor Einz's absence was a coincidence, and it definitely has something to do with the time you were frozen," Henrik explained coolly, his eyes sharply narrowing.

"You want to look for the culprit now?"

"We're going to take on the military going forward. We can't have enemies on the inside and the outside, or we'll never last. Let's figure out why they kept interfering with us and make them stop."

“Whoever they are, they can use magic. It’s dangerous to let ‘em loose,” Mathias added with a serious look.

“Though the fact they can use magic should help us narrow down the candidates,” Henrik concluded grimly.

Mathias agreed. “Only if they’re hangin’ around campus though. Upperclassmen mages with a water affinity should be able to use Freeze.”

“Affinity for water? Sorry, I’m not well-informed on your field,” Henrik admitted.

“It’s like the property of the magic you already have inside. You can have an affinity with the four main elements: fire, water, earth, and wind. Incidentally, it seems like my affinity is for wind.”

Henrik silently considered Mathias’ explanation.

“...A mage student is a devout member of Angelica’s flunkies,” Mia brought up, a glum feeling coming over her at remembering how they had burned her notebook. If Angelica had ordered a mage to freeze Mia, that mage would be the perpetrator. “I wonder if it was her... She might’ve just been under pressure to obey orders...”

The power dynamic in their relationship was obvious even to outsiders. The mage would have no choice but to do it if she was ordered to. And Angelica had enough drive—enough obsession with Felix—to demand it of her flunkies.

“In any case, Angelica’s a vicious vixen all right,” Henrik agreed, “She was likely trying to secure a seat as Felix’s lover, but you’ve really got to wonder what’s so great about that guy.”

Mia had to laugh at the rare display of jealousy from Henrik. “She seemed to be gunning for you and Mathias as well, you know? She was angry about how I seem to be enjoying myself surrounded by elite boys from the Law, Mage, and Medical Departments.” She took another good look at her friends.

Henrik had a smaller frame, but his neutral facial features were breathtaking, while his sharply angled eyes brimmed with intelligence. Mathias’ face didn’t hold the same delicate beauty of the other two, but his well-balanced, large body gave him an impact no other boy their age had. Mia hadn’t paid much

attention to it, but they both did possess distinct, handsome looks. On top of that, Henrik was the top student in their school year, and while she didn't know Mathias' grades, his bright-red eyes guaranteed powerful magic coursed through him.

Well, that's not to say they don't each have flaws too. I guess I shouldn't be surprised other girls are envious.

"You three are popular with the ladies. The girls were cute, if you're interested?" Mia teased.

Henrik gave her a look of pure disgust. "I despise underhanded, scheming types. And women who go for a guy based on how wealthy he'll make her when she digs her claws in for marriage are revolting. I'm only interested in women who've got a will of their own like—" He'd been venting until that point but suddenly came to his senses and stopped.

"Like?" Mia never imagined she'd get to talk about love or romance with these guys. Her curiosity was piqued, so she cheerfully urged him to go on by placing her elbows on the desk and her chin in her hands to look up at him with big eyes.

"Why do I have to tell you?" Henrik snapped and didn't say another word about it, averting his eyes from her face.

"Tch, you're no fun." Disappointed with Henrik, Mia turned her attention on Mathias.

He sighed and mumbled, "He's gonna be serious trouble too. What a pain."

She was about to ask what he meant, when—

"Oh, you three." Professor Rueger opened the classroom door and poked his head in.

"Professor! How's Felix?!" Mia leapt from her seat.

A soft smile touched his lips. "He committed a crime according to our current laws. It took some time, but someone from his family paid bail to get him released. His house arrest is still in place for now though... The bigger problem is the likelihood of him being held back another year."

“What? Another year? Because he won’t have attended enough days?”

As far as Mia knew, Felix was seriously attending his classes and diligently turning his reports and homework in.

“Nah, last year he failed to take the Grand Plan Creation Course, which is a required unit, and failed the year. He’ll fail again this year too; not because of attendance, but because you receive failing marks if you don’t at least turn something in with your name on it for the Grand Plan. Not to mention, Keyserling’s grades in his other courses are pitiful...”

Professor Rueger smiled ruefully and held out an envelope to them. He pulled out the Grand Plan with only Henrik and Mathias’ name on it. “Vigant, this is the real reason why you didn’t write Keyserling’s name as well as Baumann’s, isn’t it?” He gave Henrik a stern look.

“This was my third safety measure. I was positive they wouldn’t allow him to be held back for a second year,” Henrik answered with full composure.

“You’re somethin’ else,” Mathias whistled.

“With that said and done, get both of their signatures and resubmit it to me.”

“You’ll let us do that?!” Mia exclaimed.

“I’ll write it off officially as my students carelessly forgetting to write their names. Part of the blame lies with Einz’s ineptitude too. Besides, I can’t refuse a request directly from President Stricker. Just keep this between us.” Professor Rueger sounded pleased. Their Grand Plan must’ve really caught his fancy.

“Even though the Royal Academy is the biggest organization at the heart of the kingdom, they won’t let us take part in any stimulating research. I’ve been fighting for innovation to the system for a while now. Restrictions shouldn’t be placed on learning,” he continued, “This should be a place where scholars can study what they want. If we can get your Grand Plan to pass there’ll be huge reforms, but it’ll be a challenge for me considering my position. Basically, you could say you’re my accomplices in fighting the system.”

Boyish delight and deviousness glimmered in his eyes, which Mia found adorable. They had gained a reliable ally, and it brought an unintentional smile to her lips.

“We will do everything we can to make it happen. I look forward to receiving your continued guidance.”

“Then take care of getting the signatures.” Embarrassed about getting so passionate in talking to children, Professor Rueger sheepishly exited the classroom as fast as he could.

He’s a great professor who’s zealous about academics, Mia thought from the bottom of her heart.

“Oh no!” Mia exclaimed, looking at the Grand Plan. “How will we get Felix’s signature while he’s under house arrest? Mathias, do you know where he lives? I’ll deliver it to him.”

Mia’s casual question struck Mathias stiff. “Nah, I’ll take it to him instead!” he quickly offered.

“I bet he lives pretty close by,” Henrik broke in, checking over their Grand Plan next to Mia.

“I’ll sew your lips together,” Mathias threatened.

Their sudden tension reeked of secrets. Mia narrowed her eyes on her teammates. “I know he’s a wealthy nobleman, but you aren’t going to give me some lame excuse by saying I can’t visit him because I’m of a lower class, are you?”

“Uh...I mean, that guy doesn’t want you to find out. No way am I gonna be the one to blab ‘bout it.” Mathias wavered, his eyes darting around the room for a way out of explaining.

Mia felt bad putting him on the spot, so she lightened the pressure. She didn’t like that they were keeping things from her, but everyone had a secret or two. Friends were people who respected each other’s space when necessary.

“Okay, go get his signature for us then, Mathias.”

“Will do. I’ll hop right to it.” He roughly scratched his black hair in relief over being spared an inquisition and marched toward the door with the Grand Plan in hand.

“...Wait up.” Henrik circled around in front of him to block his path. “We

probably need to move as one right now.”

“Why’s that?” Mathias dubiously eyed him, itching to get out of there before things became more complicated.

“Some things have bothered me since seeing this Grand Plan. The paper with just your and my name on it was left alone in the mailbox. Most people here know Mia is teamed up with us, so it’d be weird for them not to destroy our paper too if they’d looked in the mailbox. In other words, we can assume the culprit went straight for Professor Einz without ever touching the mailbox.”

“Ah!” Mia exchanged looks with Mathias.

“Only the four of us were in the hallway when we submitted the paper. Now how did the culprit know the Grand Plan was with Professor Einz?”

Mia sank into silence. The only way for the culprit to have found out was if a member of Mia’s team or Professor Einz had shared the information with someone else.

Every member of the team had put their heart and soul into the Grand Plan and had no reason to sabotage it. Process of elimination left Professor Einz as the information leak. If it turned out she was the informant, then whoever she had told was the culprit.

Coming to that conclusion, Mia studied Henrik’s face—he was likely hinting at the same thing.

He took her look to mean she caught on, and summarized the rest of her thoughts for her, “Here’s the thing, no matter how you look at it, from Mia getting frozen to Professor Einz coming down with a sudden illness, this series of attacks is beyond what students can pull off on their own. Mia was frozen in the greenhouse, where it’d be difficult for a mage to gain entry, and even if they had somehow, didn’t Professor Bahr tell us there aren’t any students proficient enough with water magic to pull it off at this school? You could claim he’s lying, but if there really was such a student, there’d be rumors about them before the incident. And in the case that someone’s trying to conceal their power, what motive would they have for doing that? But there *is* one theory I have where everything makes perfect sense.”

“What’s your theory?”

Henrik lowered his voice to a barely audible whisper, “The military has always been trying to stop us.” He grinned at the two gaping at him. “What attacked Mia wasn’t something as benign as a girl’s jealousy gone wild. They might’ve used her to their advantage, but their real goal was to obstruct any submissions related to Demon Claw. Someone from the military has infiltrated the Royal Academy—the dots connect if we think about it that way. Think about it: the high-level freeze spell, they’re always one step ahead of us, and, most important of all, the fact that research into Demon Claw has never been touched even once until now.”

Having finished his speech, Henrik folded his arms and sighed loudly. “Man’s thirst for knowledge can’t be restrained simply by money. I’ve always thought it was highly unnatural that no scholars before us yearned for the truth. We’re talking decades of untouched research potential.”

Shudders racked Mia’s body. If Henrik’s theory was right...not only did they have enemies on the outside, but right beside them, inside their very own campus a fearsome enemy was lying in wait. She instinctively scanned the room and the view outside the windows. As she was doing that, Mathias turned blue and begun to mutter restlessly to himself. PING! A transparent bubble coalesced around them. Startled, Mia turned to Mathias.

“I made a wall of air around us. It’s beginner wind magic,” he explained, sounding relieved that his spell had worked. He was covering them so there was less of a chance they would be overheard.

Henrik still kept his voice low as they continued conversing. Their whispers were heavy, as if to represent the gravity of the situation. Nervousness tensed Mia’s cheeks.

“They shouldn’t be able to take any drastic measures on campus, but we aren’t protected outside Academy walls. So let’s not do anything alone. We’re in a crisis. We’ll go to Felix’s place as a group.”

Mathias was reluctant yet grimly nodded anyway.

“But if your theory’s right then...we’re in danger at the Academy as well. I wish we could at least pinpoint who it is,” Mia groaned.

“Professors from the Mage Department are connected to the military, but when it comes down to it, it’s President Strickler who controls personnel affairs here. The royal family only employs neutral parties,” Mathias lamented with a scrunched-up face. Silence fell inside their transparent bubble.

“I think there’s a real simple answer to this though... Not like I want to test it, but...I say we set a trap.” Sadness clouded Henrik’s visage as he held the Grand Plan up to eye level.

Chapter 14: New Technology—Magira-Aera

HENRIK’S bet that Felix lived close by was spot on. Mathias led them on foot off campus and down the bustling King’s Street until it gave way to, of all things, the royal palace. Intimidated by the black ominous spire jutting out from the center of the palace, Mia found herself suspicious of why Felix would be at the palace.

Mathias approached the guards in front of the black wrought-iron gates with giant revolving gears. “Please deliver this to Prince Emil,” he said, and handed over the envelope containing their Grand Plan, a letter affixed to it.

“Prince Emil?” Mia repeated.

Wasn’t Prince Emil Isea’s Third Prince? Her eyes went wide.

Mathias rushed to explain, “His family’s a bit complicated, so President Strickler has taken responsibility for him and entrusted him to the palace here. Relax, he’s friends with the prince, so it’ll be sure to reach him.” His explanation was persuasive and questionable at the same time.

“He’s friends with the prince?”

Their worlds were too far apart.

Henrik was skeptical. “Friends, eh?”

They waited in front of the intimidating gates for ten minutes until a messenger from the palace returned with the signed Grand Plan in hand. When Mia asked if Felix would come see them, the messenger curtly told her he wasn’t permitted outside while under house arrest.

WITH the Grand Plan in hand, they left the palace and returned to the library study room, where Henrik commenced detailing the trap they were going to set. Once they finished preparing everything, they went to Pharmacology Hall. They passed right by Professor Rueger’s office, where a tag hung informing

visitors that he was out of the office, and took a deep breath before entering the prep room next door.

“Mia?” Surprise flickered in Professor Einz’s eyes past the thick glass of her spectacles.

“How are you feeling, Professor Einz?”

“My fever went down right away. Thank you for asking. I am so sorry about what happened the other day. You put so much work into it too. I suddenly fell ill... Before I knew it, it was already night. I panicked so bad...” Wariness crossed her face. She was bent over a desk with student submitted reports spread out in front of her—apparently, she was healthy enough to return to normal work.

“Your illness was so bad that you needed to be hospitalized in the middle of the night, so I don’t blame you for what was out of your control. Do you feel better now?” Remembering the taste of her absolute despair yesterday brought the anger Mia had shoved down rushing back to the surface. She mustered up her self-control and forced a half-smile.

Professor Einz looked thoroughly relieved to see Mia’s ever-so-slightly twitching smile. “Please take this,” she held out a beautifully wrapped box of cookies. “I felt like I had to do something to apologize. I was planning to deliver it to your study room later. Do enjoy the cookies with your teammates.”

Mia reached a hand out for the box, but it slipped from her fingers. The box slammed against the ground, the cookies cracking loudly inside.

“I’m so sorry! I should’ve made sure you had a hold on it first...!” Professor Einz rushed to pick up the broken box and directly placed it in Mia’s hands, wrapping them around the container with her own hands so it was secure this time.

Mia lowered her head and apologized, “I’m sorry as well.”

Awkwardness filled the space between them. Then Henrik broke through the uncomfortable mood to get right to the point of their visit. “We’ve retrieved Felix’s signature from his house arrest. Professor Rueger appears to be out of his office right now, so would you mind holding on to our Grand Plan for us?”

“Huh? ...Yes, of course! I will definitely ensure it gets turned in this time!”

Professor Einz smiled broadly and accepted their Grand Plan. She took it out from the envelope to read it over. “Yes, this is it. What a relief it’s here in time...” She stroked the paper, looking absolutely pleased.

After Mia, Henrik, and Mathias ascertained they had passed it to her, they left the prep room. They stomped loudly out of the hallway, then immediately walked around to the back quad sprawling to the north of Pharmacology Hall. Purposely softening their footsteps, they approached Professor Rueger’s office, where they looked up at his window set several feet over their heads.

“We’ve cast the bait. Will they make a move?”

Mia removed a cookie from the box in her hand while they patiently laid in wait for the culprit to appear. The cookies appeared to be homemade. Though cracked and crumbled, they remained looking perfectly scrumptious. Buttery sweet smells tempted Mia, but she simply lacked the urge to eat anything at the moment.

“What will they do next? Rip it? Burn it?” Mia whispered.

“No problem for us if they do, we’ve got plenty of copies!” Mathias triumphantly pulled three envelopes from his jacket pocket. They’d made multiple copies so that no matter how many times the enemy ripped, discarded, and destroyed a copy of their Grand Plan, Mia knew they could easily reproduce it.

“Yeah,” Henrik agreed. “That’s why...if it were me, though, I would use the most effective method. I really hope they won’t go for that though.”

SLAM! A loud sound rang from the other side of the window. Professor Rueger’s angry voice erupted next, “What are you doing there, Einz?”

“Professor...you are here today...? Mia and her team just told me you were away and left this in my care.”

In a single second, even Mia could tell the temperature in the office had dropped to freezing. Her knees buckled at the next thing that was said.

“EINZ?! Why are you tearing that?!”

“...This Grand Plan is dangerous. We can’t allow it to reach the public. So we

mustn't let it pass through the competition."

"I don't believe it... You were the one interfering with them? ...Why?"

"Please don't think badly of me, Professor. We will be ruined if even a little doubt creeps in."

Henrik grimly stood and looked to Mathias. "My thought was that if we didn't have a contact—someone who's on our side—our Grand Plan would never get through, no matter how many spare copies we made. So I asked Professor Rueger and *him* for help."

Someone leapt down from the tree just as Henrik put his hand on the window frame. Somehow, the person was able to jump to the window to swiftly enter the prep room next door. Mathias began chanting a spell. Wind rushed to him, and his body weightlessly lifted into the air.

Falling behind, Mia grabbed on to the window frame and hoisted herself up. She looked into the office just as Professor Einz's spectacles fell off in her struggle to keep the Grand Plan away from Professor Rueger.

No way.

Without her spectacles to conceal them anymore, the true color of her eyes was exposed. Her impression changed dramatically; with sharp red eyes, she seemed like a different person. Mia's eyes locked on hers and her memories came flooding back, the red color reconstructing the irreversibly shattered memory.

That...face...those...eyes! What she had remembered hadn't been the red of a tie at all, but the eyes of the culprit who had frozen her in the greenhouse.

"This is the end!" Professor Einz yelled sharply.

At the same time—

"Now! Felix!" Henrik shouted from outside. The prep room door flung open. For a split-second, Professor Einz stopped chanting her spell as Felix charged into the room.

He threw himself on her and declared, "The greatest weakness of magic is how long it takes to cast a spell!" He shoved a handkerchief in her mouth. "And

not being able to cast once your mouth's been sealed is the other weakness!"

Mia rubbed her eyes at how unbelievably fast everything had played out. But it was too soon to relax. Professor Einz kicked Felix off her and spun around, freeing one of her hands. She punched him in the gut and spat the handkerchief out.

"Are you sure about that?" she sneered. She yanked an army knife out of her pocket and swung its drawn blade right through Felix's uniform above his chest. Then she drew the blade back to get a better angle for her next strike. Her agility and skill was beyond what a mere professor should've been able to pull off.

"WATCH OUT! Felix!" Mia dropped down from the window, dashing frantically to push Felix out of the way.

"Mia! Don't!" He dodged her and spun around so that he hid her behind his back instead.

"O Wind Elementals who surround me, protect my master! Vocale Sulfatio Ventos Furume! Protect Emil Felix Leonard Lohenstein!" Mathias chanted, casting his spell.

"GAH! Mathias, don't use that name!" Felix yelled hysterically.

A thick wall of wind formed in front of Mia and Felix.

"Stop complainin', it's a crisis! The elementals won't understand without your true name!" Mathias shouted back.

Professor Einz's knife bounced off of Mathias' whirlwind and was flung into the wall.



“Lohenstein...?” Professor Einz’s eyes widened as she stared at Felix. She dropped the second knife she pulled out of her boot. Then her gaze swung to Mathias. *“...Weren’t you just a first-year mage student? Sixteen-year-olds can’t even begin to control elementals. Your classes shouldn’t have even mentioned them yet.”*

Mathias straightened his ill-fitting blazer; it threatened to burst apart from the strain of his movements. “Sorry, but, as much as it’s to my great displeasure, I had to falsify my age by a lot. Besides, weren’t you the one who said that smart mage students can teach themselves through advanced textbooks at their own pace?”

Seeing that Professor Einz had lost the will to keep fighting, Professor Rueger seized her, grabbing the duct tape on his desk to bind her.

Falsified his age? Huh? Is it just me, or did I just hear some ridiculously long name just a second ago? Mia was trying to sort through the tangled information in her mind when she was surprised by the sight of platinum hair appearing in the office doorway. Henrik finally showed up.

“Ah, sorry. Looks like it’s all over,” he apologized with a composed face.

Hadn’t he tried to pull himself onto the window frame before Mia had? But he ended up circling back around the building to enter through the main office door. In other words—

“Don’t tell me...y-you couldn’t climb up?”

Just how little strength does he have?

He aloofly nodded. “Do I look like someone who’s fit? I never do pull-ups, and you put me on the spot, expecting me to be like those two there, who’ve been trained since infancy to swing a sword. We have different training, you know.”

That’s not the problem. Even I could climb through the window... Mia was amazed by how proudly he’d dismissed that particular fact.

Henrik strode into the room and faced Professor Einz, as if to emphasize it was time for his skills to come into play. “Professor Einz, you are with the military, aren’t you? You can’t talk your way out of this one.”

Bound, Professor Einz jerked her chin in the direction of the ripped Grand Plan. “Should I presume that was a trap?” She grimaced.

“Professor Rueger lent us a hand too,” Henrik affirmed.

“How did you figure it out? I thought I had you all wrapped around my finger.”

“We did not want to doubt you, Professor. We truly wished you were a passionate educator like Professor Rueger here.” Henrik pinned her with an icy glare. “Why don’t we compare answers, hm? Einz?” Henrik dropped all formality as he scrutinized her.

“No one can deny your methods were effective. You won us over with your sweets and honeyed words. But you made a critical mistake earlier—without any hesitation whatsoever, you accepted into your own hands a Grand Plan that had been signed by Felix, someone who you knew may have very well been infected with Demon Claw. The school has been in an uproar about it, so you can’t feign ignorance.

“It would’ve been natural for you to fear the potential of infection from contact with his team like the rest of the Academy, because we were with him. The only explanation for why you wouldn’t be afraid is that you knew Demon Claw isn’t contagious. And the only people who know that—who are positive about it—are those responsible for spreading the lies in the first place. You signed your own confession by your actions.” Henrik logically dismantled her; Professor Einz grudgingly bit her lip.

“Why did you do it, Professor Einz?” Mia asked mournfully. She had been so kind to them.

“...If this Grand Plan gets out there...the Mage Brigade will fall apart. The military will lose all power. Then the remnants of Radius, who’ve been lying in wait for an opportunity to rebel, will make their move. The internal rifts will tear us apart from the inside out and culminate in this kingdom’s downfall. The Era of the Mage, *Magira-Aera*, is an absolutely necessary technology for Isea Kingdom!” Professor Einz explained desperately.

“You’re calling your new technology Magira-Aera, ‘the Era of the Mage,’ huh?” Henrik cynically repeated the information Professor Einz accidentally

spilled. She'd lost her cool as the target of their judging eyes.

She quickly tried to hide her weakness by furthering her emotional appeal, "That's why we've been nipping it in the bud like this for generations. Students are simple to direct toward what's easier for them. I've always lured them away from the topic by creating an obstruction, and then showing them an easy way out of it—until you children came along... Don't think you're off the hook because you caught me. There are many more where I came from. People who are willing to offer themselves up to protect our great Kingdom! You know, the patients with Demon Claw should actually rejoice over the honor of fulfilling their duty to this country! I am a patriot!"

"You're implying sacrificing the few for the many is excusable?" Felix pressed her with a disgusted scowl.

"...We are steadily regulating the amount of magic siphoned to decrease the number of fatalities. So the number of sacrifices should significantly decrease."

"What you *actually* mean is that you are regulating the *injected* magic," Mia corrected. "To stop Angel Tears from claiming any more precious mages, yes? You think you can fool us?"

Professor Einz held her tongue.

"You disappoint me," Professor Rueger concluded regretfully and summoned for a pair of Auto Guards lying in wait outside. They thudded into the room and restrained her with handcuffs. Her back stood perfectly straight as she marched out the door, led by their firm grip on the chain attached to her cuffs. It was as if she were saying she wasn't in the wrong. Professor Rueger followed them out to ensure there were no further incidents.

HEAVY silence fell over the office. Mia collected the ripped shreds of their Grand Plan and sighed loudly. The sense of profound despair in the room gradually permeated her body, weighing her down. Everyone was experiencing the same feeling. They all remained quiet, their expressions pensive.

After some time, Henrik spoke up, "It's done." He exchanged the ruined Grand Plan for one of their many copies.

“...Hm...?” Mia absently stared at Felix Keyserling’s signature. Suddenly, the doubts she’d shoved to the side for the time being crept back in.

Mathias didn’t call him Felix...Keyserling...did he?

A certain name repeated itself inside her head until she finally said it aloud. “Emil Felix Leonard Lohenstein...is the name Mathias said for his spell, but...isn’t that the name of Third Prince Emil...? Felix...are you...um...” Her mind raced to deny it even as she spoke. Unable to connect the pieces herself, she looked imploringly at Felix. He stared back at her with fear in his eyes.

Henrik gave a small exasperated laugh beside them. “Aaah, cat’s finally out of the bag.”

Mia looked at him in shock. “You knew?!”

“It’s weirder not to realize, being as close to him as we are. You lack perception. Even that vicious law student marked him because she sniffed it out. Plus, I can’t believe you still didn’t figure it out after going to the palace and hearing Mathias’ lame excuse.”

“Well, sorry it was so lame,” Mathias grumbled.

“The prince... Is that why you did it? Don’t you know how valuable your life is?”

All the pieces finally came together; she understood for the first time why he’d foolishly charged into the Sanatorium. Mia stared at him with eyes so wide she thought her eyeballs would fall out.

Every human being is equal—the ideology had grown proponents in Isea Kingdom as well. In their country, Isea Royal Academy was the forerunner of that idea. Mia did hope someday the world would truly abide by such an ideal concept.

But she knew reality wasn’t made of hopes. The world wasn’t a pretty place, and equality wasn’t the same in real life as it was on paper. Lives with different values still existed.

“I thought I could use it to our advantage because I know my value. I believed doing what I did would be for the best,” Felix sadly admitted.

He hadn't charged into the Sanatorium and been let out scot-free because he was a noble. It wasn't because he was rich. But because he was a prince.

They would have no choice but to develop a medicine if he'd fallen ill with Demon Claw. And that wasn't all—through his actions, the unspeakable disease that the world was scared to even think of would be forced into public conversation if a prince was infected with it.

Once brought to the foreground of the world's attention, it would no longer be relegated to the back of people's minds. Curiosity would spread as fast as the news, and patriotic researchers would devote themselves to researching it.

And that was why, with no solid proof that he really couldn't get infected—or rather, with the hopes of getting infected—he'd broken into the Sanatorium. To save Mia's mother...and end things without her tears.

"Why did you go so far for me?" She needed to know.

"You saved me first, without even knowing who I was, Mia. I just did the same thing you did." A warm, sunflower-like smile blossomed on his face.

"It's not the same. Because saving someone who's ill... I only did what's natural?" Mia had asked him the same question since the day he'd started helping her, and she would continue to ask until she had a *real* answer. It was such a mystery to her and she couldn't stand it. She hardly believed she was worth him going so far.

"What you did wasn't natural to me at all. I've been dealing with these attacks for ages. People always pretended to worry about me on the surface without taking me seriously because it's not a threat to my life. It seems like all I ever wanted was just for someone to hug and comfort me like you did, but nobody ever did that for me."

"Not even your parents or relatives?"

"My mom is gone. My dad and my older brothers dismiss my attacks as me being weak. So I came to believe it was my weakness at fault too. I was convinced I was a spare that had come to be by mistake, that there was no point for me to exist," Felix confessed. "That's why...do you understand how *much* you saved me by saying I was important? That I *mattered*?"

Mia frowned upon hearing the isolation Felix had endured. She'd grown up separated from her mom, but the letters had brought her loving words of support. And she'd gained confidence through Doctor Letts' encouragement.

"Still...if you actually got infected, you could've died, you know?"

"Yeah, but I genuinely believed our theory. It's not contagious." He glanced at Henrik. Then he smiled wryly as he walked over to Mia and pulled her head against his chest. He squeezed her against him, then caressed her cheeks in both hands so he could look deep into her eyes.

"...My reasons aren't logical. They won't get through to you unless I clearly tell you. But if you make me put these feelings into words, I won't let you escape anymore? For better or worse, I have that power."

Mia frantically shook her head, a difficult gesture with his hands on her face, to stop him from saying more. She couldn't deny the loud pounding of her heart, the heat in her cheeks, and her heightened consciousness of his chest so close to her. But...he was a prince and she was a commoner. She wasn't so optimistic to believe things would go smoothly between them. The determination to make that decision was out of reach for her too. Most of all—

She deeply exhaled and opened her mouth to speak, the ghost of a voice coming out hoarse, "...Thank you. Your feelings mean a lot to me, Felix." Hope lit up Felix's face. She hesitated, seeing his boyish smile, yet continued, "But...when it comes down to it, I want to prioritize my mom and Demon Claw. I'm certain I'll regret it someday if I don't. I absolutely don't want to experience a day where I look back only to realize I didn't do everything possible to save her."

His breath caught at her honest admission. But the instant after, his gentle smile appeared. He studied her face. "Okay. I also want to stay as just Felix in front of you for now. I kinda enjoy having fun with the team too."

A hint of bitterness flashed in his sweet eyes, causing Mia's heart to thud just as Henrik got a snide jab in, "Awww, he's pretending to wait."

Felix shot him an angry glare. "I plan to wait as long as I need to until Mia is ready to say yes, but I won't let anyone else have her—*especially* you!" He thrust his index finger toward Henrik. Laughter escaped Mia at his childish

gesture.

The various quirks of his silly personality ruining his image were so like him—and what she loved.

“Em—I mean, Felix...why’re you so bad at this...?” Mathias smacked his hand against his head.

The way he’d addressed him as ‘Felix’ and his informal attitude were pleasing to Felix’s ears.

Chapter 15: The Greatest Achievement of the Year

THE entire affair was dealt with in secret, and Professor Einz left the Academy as summer arrived. Publicly, she left because she was transferred to a military unit, but in reality she was just returning to her official position.

Her replacement assistant professor hadn't been selected yet. After what had happened, they were taking their time to pick a professor of legitimate neutral standing.

Every time Mia passed by the empty prep room, she was reminded of the woman who had befriended her with her dignified figure and gentle purple eyes hidden behind blue spectacles. She had showed up with numerous sweets for every day they slaved away in the library. With each painful memory, a coldness touched Mia's heart despite the warm summer weather.

Professor Einz's kindness had all been a farce so she could wiggle her way into Mia's life to obtain information and maintain the status quo. Till the very end, she had refused to apologize and likely never would. Sacrificing a few to protect the many was a worthwhile inevitability—that's what her sense of justice told her.

Then with my own sense of justice, I'll do the exact opposite. Mia wasn't so arrogant as to claim that she wanted to save everyone ailed in the world, but she would do her best to offer a hand to those nearby who were seeking help. Her aid wouldn't be limited to her mom.

If our nation is going to abandon Demon Claw patients to death after subjecting them to it, then I'll be the one to save them. Someday, for sure. Mia clenched her fists and looked up at the broad sky, where blue peeked through the thick layer of smog set adrift by summer winds.

SUMMER came suddenly, and with it, the sun stayed blazing in the sky for the longest hours making it so gas powered lamps ceased to run throughout the

day. With the arrival of summer came the Summer Solstice Celebration. The auditorium was packed with the entire student body, but the air was relatively bearable because mage students used wind spells to cool the room down in addition to the massive gear-powered fans.

Isea Royal Academy's faculty had clarified in a school-wide announcement, and in their individual classes, that Mia and her team were free of infection, but students still kept their distance. A ring of empty chairs surrounded them wherever they sat. But once today was over, students leave the Academy to enjoy summer break. As gossip was said to last only seventy-five days before the next juicy scandal, Mia was optimistic that things would return to normal in due time.

Or perhaps it was because something else on her mind was far more important than how people she had never even cared about thought of her.

Competition results were set to be announced during the assembly. Before revealing the winners, the faculty announced who had earned the best grades of each class year. Henrik had scored "Perfect" in every subject, securing him as the top of the first-year students. Mia couldn't compare to him in all subjects combined, but she maintained her seat as the top student in the Pharmacology Department.

Then there was Felix and Mathias, who had scored horribly with Pass or Fail marks for every subject outside of their Grand Plan. Fortunately for them, they both narrowly escaped being held back a year. They owed that to their Grand Plan, which had earned the sole Perfect grade in their year. Had the two not teamed up with Henrik and Mia, they would've very likely failed the year.

"And here I was thinking you were just pretending to be bad at everything. I'm ashamed as one of your citizens," Henrik taunted.

"I'm ashamed as your caretaker too," Mathias agreed.

"Mathias, you don't get to say that."

Mia gave a strained smile at their sharp-tongued banter just as the auditorium filled with excited chatter. They were about to announce the competition results everyone was dying to know.

Ba-dump! Ba-dump! Her heart started to hammer wildly, her blood coursed anxiously through her veins. Her entire body was at the mercy of her heart's tempo. Feeling dizzy, Mia slammed her eyes shut.

Calm down. We received a Perfect score. We'll be fine!

Applause erupted in the distance. But not a fragment of her friends' previously amiable mood was left. They neither clapped nor made a peep.

Unnerved, Mia cracked her eyes open, to be dumbfounded by what the grinding, steam-powered projectors in the back had projected onto the wall in front of them. Mia and her teammates' names were absent from the list of winners. In their place was a row of upperclassmen's names.

No matter how many times she blinked and rubbed at her eyes, the dimly lit list didn't change. Mia pinched her cheek—if this was a dream, she wanted to wake up. But her hopes fell flat, as each pinch to her cheek, hand, and arm left only physical pain to accompany her mental anguish.

“...This is a bad...joke...right?”

President Strickler stood on the stage that was raised several feet off the auditorium floor by a gear-controlled crank. As the chief director of the competition, he stroked his curled mustache and cleared his throat with an air of importance, drawing the students' attention.

“Ahem. The competition this time had many excellent papers to choose from, and it was an unexpectedly close contest, but this is what we decided on after careful deliberation.” He read the names off a paper with a smile. By the time he had read the name of almost every winner, Mia lost the will to continue standing and crouched on the ground.

...It didn't work. It didn't work! Mom—

“Mia,” all three of her teammates nervously called her name. She wanted to cry because she knew they were trying to figure out how to comfort her.

I'm sorry, guys. I put you through a lot, and it didn't result in anything...

“Finally,” President Strickler said in a noticeably louder voice. The chatter stopped again. Surprised, Mia lifted her head, and her eyes met his. The usual

smile was gone from his face, which was strange because she had only ever seen him smile. His image changed completely when he was expressionless, as if he were another person altogether. “Mia Baumann, Felix Keyserling, Henrik Vigant, and Mathias Weiss, please come to the stage,” he ordered in a harsh voice.

Mia leapt from her crouched position like a lit firework. Her teammates gave her a nudge to take the lead towards the stage. Making her way over, she carefully stepped onto a platform that creaked as its gears were cranked to elevate it to the stage’s height.

What’s going on? What the heck is going to happen?! I sure hope they aren’t going to berate us in front of the entire school for infiltrating the Sanatorium! What other reason would they have to call her team to the stage?

As she was withdrawing inside her mind, President Strickler suddenly grinned. It was the grin of a child who had succeeded in pulling off a prank.

“Their Grand Plan was an investigation into Demon Claw’s infectiousness. They are still just first-years, and their content lacked the expertise to win... However, they earned our highest regard for an ingenious topic that delved into a subject no one had ever tackled and for their resilient zeal that withstood the most relentless guidance...and so, every member of the Academy’s faculty and I, as the president, have decided to back them! We hope all our students will learn from their passion and embrace their studies just as fervently! A round of applause!”

The auditorium stirred. Students looked at each other questioningly. Then one clap, and another, crisply echoed above the sound of the whirring projector. Then all at once, a roaring round of applause consumed the auditorium in a raging downpour. Mia couldn’t stop from shaking and instinctively held onto Felix’s hand.

Professor Rueger brought them their special certificate with an even wider smile. “Will the representative of your team step forward?”

Mia looked at Felix, Henrik, and then Mathias. They all smiled at her, signaling for her to step forward.

“B-But...are you sure you’re okay with me?”

“Who else would it be?” Henrik gave her back a small nudge.

She took a step forward to receive the special certificate from Professor Rueger. Neatly embossed in golden letters read, “Isea Royal Academy’s Special Award.”

Professor Rueger addressed her, “You’ve gained irreplaceable friends. That is the greatest achievement you’ve made this year.” His face flushed as he continued, “Many processes go into developing a new medicine. Not all of them can be accomplished by the Pharmacology Department alone. Once you create a medicine, you have to conduct clinical studies on people after you succeed with animal testing. During your clinical trials you’ll need to clear daunting legal procedures. And above all else, the medicine you want to create is intimately connected to magic. Naturally, your research requires all departments: pharmacology, medicine, law, and magic to succeed! I’m excited to see what outrageous things will come of this. The Royal Academy will cover all funding for your project and absolutely won’t succumb to the military’s pressure. So go as far as you can possibly go!”

Powerful determination lit his eyes as he gazed at her. “Let’s fight them together, my little comrade.”

They had successfully climbed over an impossibly high wall, and that wall had become a stepping-stone for the next towering wall. Professor Rueger was solidifying the foundations for their climb to even higher places in the future.

What a reassuring and mighty ally we’ve gained. Mia firmly shook the hand he offered her.

AFTER the award ceremony came the Summer Solstice Celebration’s party. Students congratulated other continuing students for making it to the next school year while bidding farewell to the graduating class.

Flinging off their sweltering blazers, Mia and the team ran to the front quad where summer graced the air. Dry, hot winds caressed their cheeks as they squinted at the blaring sunlight.

The faculty enjoyed themselves, surrounded by their happily chattering

students. Professor Rueger was at the center of the biggest group. The man dubbed as “the Wall” changed entirely when he was freed from the responsibility of his job; his face was still on the scary side, but he transformed into a friendly gentleman after work.

“Thanks to you, Professor, I’ve come to realize what I want to do with my life,” said one of the surrounding students, bowing deeply. “I suffered through your relentless workload, but I’m glad I did it. I’ll work hard after graduation too. Thank you so much.”

“You can do it. Hard work is your greatest asset.”

Warmth spread through Mia as she watched his students thank him.

“You know,” Henrik suddenly mentioned in a whisper, “until Felix infiltrated the Sanatorium, I thought Professor Rueger was the culprit.”

“You did?”

“Yes, because as Professor Einz’s superior, he was the most likely suspect for her attack. Let’s not forget how much the Wall obstructed us in the beginning too. I thought he had some sort of ulterior motive for getting in our way. Didn’t he lay into you pretty hard too, Mia?”

“Well, yeah, when you put it like that... My gripes about him ended when he accepted our Grand Plan though. He’s just more passionate about helping his students succeed than others. So I’m really glad Professor Rueger was the professor in charge of us.”

Mia’s solemn trip down memory lane was interrupted by high-pitched, grating giggles. It came from Angelica, who was chatting up a different male law student a small distance away. Mia couldn’t tell what his school year was from her angle, but she could make out his blond hair and blue eyes. He assertively held her hand, a giddy blush alight on his freckled white cheeks.

On the other hand, Angelica was disinterested and smiled at him insincerely. Mia watched her, wondering what had happened to her attachment to Felix, when Angelica suddenly noticed her gaze and flashed a triumphant, bratty smirk.

Apparently, Mia would never shake her animosity. Discouraged, she glanced

at Felix.

“Looks like her affections died thanks to the rumors of me being infected with Demon Claw.” He smiled sardonically.

“Nah, I think it’s because she got whiff of another rumor too,” Henrik chimed in.

“Another rumor?”

“The one about the Prince being in the second-year class. I’ve got a hunch somebody purposely spread that one.” Henrik shot Felix a knowing look. Neither affirming nor denying Henrik’s insinuations, Felix merely offered an extremely pleased grin.

“Anyhow, doesn’t it feel great to know she has such a clear objective to go after?”

SUNLIGHT faded over the horizon and oil lamps sparked to life in the front quad. One by one, the remaining sections of darkness were lit by fireflies. Lured by the naturally lit greenery and the flames, girls and boys who had paired off during the party disappeared outside. Feeling the end of the party nearing, Mia was glum. Although she was moving on to her second year at the Academy, she wasn’t happy.

With their Grand Plan turned in, there was no need for the group of four to convene and study together. After all, the team had only formed for the sole purpose of writing up the Grand Plan.

Now that they had completed their primary objective, the team would break up. From here, they would strive to achieve their respective goals separately in their graduation research. Whether they wanted to stay in the team or form a new one was up to each member.

If I remember correctly, Mathias said he was only in it for the year. And Henrik also...gave a time limit, since he was only cooperating until we submitted the Grand Plan.

Nothing was compelling them to stay together after this. Should another,

more attractive topic catch their eye, they could switch to it next year and submit a different Grand Plan.

Desolate fretfulness tainted her sense of accomplishment with a smear of gloomy black. Smothered under the weight of her anxieties, Mia sighed and sighed again.

Felix anxiously asked her, “Something wrong?”

“Yeah... Professor Rueger spoke highly of our team, but...I think we’ll let him down because we’ll be working separately from here on out,” Mia mumbled.

Felix responded reflexively with, “Why? Mia, I have every intention of continuing my research with you? I mean, weren’t you going to give me the okay once you develop a medicine and save your mother?! In which case, I have to give it all I’ve got to work with you and get that medicine developed as soon as possible!”

“Give you the ‘okay’? Huh? Since when was that decided?! I never said anything of the sort!”

Flustered, she sought help from her other friends, but Mathias ignored her confusion and wearily answered, “If Felix is stickin’ with it, then I am too... Not like I’ve got a choice. I’m the babysitter.” Mathias shifted his gaze from the gaping Mia to Henrik. Henrik lightly rolled his shoulders.

“I have no intention of letting you guys have all the fun with this topic—More like, this topic is no longer just yours, Mia. I’ll be mad if you plan to hog it to yourself. Just so you know.”

“Then...then you will all continue this research with me?”

The three boys nodded with a look that said, *“Isn’t that obvious?”*

It seemed Mia was the only one with any doubts. She couldn’t hide her delight; the team had reformed right as it was to be dissolved with their first year.

“Thank you...thank you!” She spontaneously took each of their hands and shook them, swinging it up and down as hard as she could.

“Woohoo!” Felix lit up.

“Whoa!” Henrik’s eyes widened in surprise.

“H-Hey!” Mathias panicked.

They all had distinct reactions and smiles.

Mom...just you wait. I’ll definitely succeed in saving you, with these people at my side...!

The place she could never have reached alone, she had reached by borrowing their help—no, by joining with them to help each other. Together, surely, they would reach the highest wall, climb over it, and attain their end goal.

Mia took Felix’s hand in hers once again, and he giddily took Mathias’ hand. Mia took Henrik’s in her free hand, and he expressionlessly grabbed Mathias’ other hand.



They brought their hands to the middle of their circle and shared a smile.

And then—

“Let’s work hard next year too!”

The night sky they gazed up at together was filled with their dreams for the future and the evening stars, twinkling brilliantly.

The End

Afterword

THANK you for picking up a copy of *Mia and the Forbidden Medicine Report*! Did you enjoy it?

I wrote this story around the time Professor Satoshi Ōmura was awarded the 2015 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. The drug derived from his discoveries, Ivermectin, is now used against river blindness, lymphatic filariasis, and other parasitic infections that were previously considered incurable. He turned around and provided the drug for free, resulting in his discovery saving many people in developing countries who were highly susceptible to these illnesses.

However, the reality is that this medicine was offered free of charge only because Ivermectin returned massive profits from treating filariasis—a parasitic disease caused by roundworm infection—in dogs first.

Though citizens of developing countries still suffer from a vast number of currently incurable diseases, very few medicines are being produced to treat them. Pharmaceutical companies won't make drugs for people who lack the money or power necessary to purchase them. After all, they can't make a profit off of them.

Mia and the Forbidden Medicine Report is a shoujo entertainment novel that I've packed full of scenes centering on medicine development. I'd be so thrilled if you enjoyed *Mia* and the gang's adventures and love developments (I certainly enjoyed writing it as the author!), but most of all, it is my greatest hope as an author that this microcosm made you feel something, no matter how slight.

Thank you so much for accompanying me until the end!

-Fumi Yamamoto



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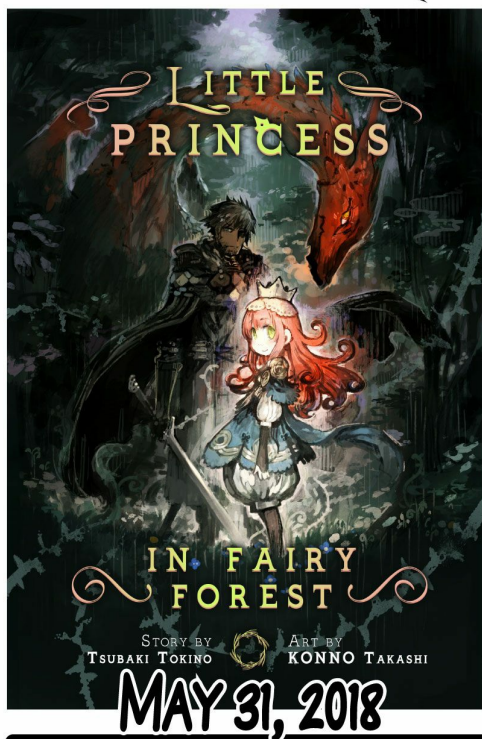
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